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OR,

THE THREE CREEDS.



'VERTS;

OR,

THE THREE CREEDS.

A Nobel.

BY

DR. MAURICE DAVIES,

AUTHOR OF "UNORTHODOX LONDON," "BROAD CHURCH," ETC.

"The Bee and Spider, by a diverse power,
Suck honey and poison from the selfsame flower."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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'VERTS.

BOOK I.—FROM ELSIE'S DIARY.

CHAPTER I.

Z O A R.



AS I have some idea of one day writing a story, I shall employ these blank pages in my interleaved diary, for the purpose of collecting a few preliminary facts. I was much struck with a remark of Mr. Moddle the other day (of course I shall explain who Mr. Moddle is, all in good time). He said that the most uneventful life, if properly described, would possess all the interest of a three-volume novel. I am not sure he meant this as a compliment, because he depreciates works of fiction. I

adore them. At the same time as Mr. Moddle made that remark, he said something to me quietly about my possessing the creative faculty. I did not quite catch what he said; and if I had been clear as to the words, I should not have felt certain that he was not poking fun at me. Mr. Moddle is very satirical. My Cousin Percy was by, and said—

“Don’t talk such nonsense to that girl, Moddle; you’ll be turning her head, and inducing her to write her autobiography in three volumes. We have a good many queer people in Zoar, small as it is; but I hope we shan’t disgrace ourselves so far as to number a lady-novelist among the population at the next census.”

I had never thought of such a thing before, but I there and then resolved that I would write a novel in three volumes, and moreover, that it should be autobiographical, but not, I hope, an illustration of Mr. Moddle’s remark, because I do not mean my life to be uneventful if I can help it. I

project for myself a stirring career. I have outgrown the period when I thought I should like to marry a pirate or a bandit, provided only he were dark and picturesquely dressed. I begin even to see through officers—not that there are many to cross our orbit in Zoar. It is a small cathedral town—the smallest in England I believe; that is why I give it the pseudonym of Zoar. There are reasons for my thoughts taking a Scriptural turn.

I mean to devote the opening chapter to myself and my surroundings. But, dear me, what a time it must take to write a three-volume novel! I have not got to the end of my second side of foolscap, and I reckon I shall have to write thirty-five for each chapter. It seems like cutting the first sod for a railway, or laying the first brick for a cathedral. Of course this is all inartistic—a sort of peg on which to hang my subsequent story, and not by any means the story itself.

The plan that I shall adopt, then, is first

to pose myself before the looking-glass, and try to write an honest unflattering pen-and-ink sketch of myself. I wonder whether a woman can do this. Artists have painted their own pictures; why should not authors describe themselves? I had thought of heading my opening chapter "*Veluti in speculum.*" Mr. Moddle taught me Latin; but perhaps it would be pedantic to adopt a classical title. I hate pedantry. Mr. Moddle is very clever, but he never "shows off," as the boys say.

I am tall; there can be no doubt of that. I am also thin; of that there can be equally little question. As I survey my reflected self, I have a considerable sensation of legs. Honestly I don't believe I am a very good person for a heroine: but I have not the slightest imagination to invent another—though Mr. Moddle does say I am creative. I must be egotistical, or I am nothing. Let me proceed. I am very pale, and my face, I grieve to add, is freckled. My eyes, which are deep set, are of no colour in particular,

which I regret; but—so somebody tells me—my hands are nice—very long, thin, and white, my hair golden, and I wear persistently one long curl over my shoulder. I have a reason for doing that. I am not yet so ancient as to be afraid to own that my age is three-and-twenty. I look that age, but my manner is younger. I have the reputation of gushing with my friends, but am exceedingly reserved before strangers. So much for myself at present.

“Elsie,” said Cousin Percy, a day or two after Mr. Moddle’s remark about my creative faculty, “you are not letting yourself be influenced by what that old ass Moddle said, I hope. I notice you have been a good deal in your room lately, and I have reason to believe your use of pen and ink is more habitual than of old. I don’t care to have that dear finger of yours ebon-tipped, ivory though it be.”

I said nothing in reply, but simply pulled my hand away and looked fierce. He did not seem to mind. He pays compliments

much as one would enunciate a proposition of Euclid (I learnt Euclid of Mr. Moddle). He has no right to play with my hand—at least not yet. Besides, Mr. Moddle is certainly not an ass, and not *very* old.

“Percy,” I continued, “what is the population of Zoar?”

“O, it’s a guide-book we are compiling, is it? That’s better than a frivolous love-story. Well, Zoar, in and out——”

“What do you mean by ‘in and out?’”

“The city and surroundings—would number between five and six thousand.”

“No more? And yet we have that big cathedral, into which we could put all the population at a pinch, yet to which not half a dozen ever go on weekdays; besides which we have St. Hilda’s and your church.”

“Will you excuse me for remarking that I am not an inquiring stranger, about to study the city and environs. Be quiet, there’s a good girl. I want to finish the *Record*, and send it off by post to London; I share it with Uncle Samuel.”

So I came upstairs and wrote again.

Certainly Zoar is one of the quaintest and coziest of bijou cities ; and as you look down upon it from the hills with which it is surrounded, you become conscious how clever those old monks and friars were in their choice of site. It rains nearly every day in Zoar, but as nobody has anything very particular to do, or which could not be put off until to-morrow, it does not much matter. Of course the Dean and Canon in residence have to go to cathedral twice a day, and a Dean in canonicals being conveyed across the green by a verger who holds an umbrella over him instead of carrying a mace in front, is not picturesque. But Zoar is very tranquil, and we soon get to look upon umbrellas and waterproofs as the normal conditions of existence. We residents often cry out about the dulness of Zoar ; but I find when any of us go out into the big world, we are always very glad to get back to Zoar again. I wonder whether I shall ever feel this sensation.

It is, I suppose, very irreverent, but I can-

not help comparing the dean and chapter and numerous clergy, who constitute the upper crust of Zoar society, to the jackdaws that haunt the cathedral. They are so black and sleek and shiny, and seem so thoroughly a part of the building; and when one dies—either a daw or a dignitary—another equally black and shiny comes and takes his place so naturally that one does not feel the transition in the least, though I suppose the bird or the clergyman does. To me it seems as though there were a sort of clerical *anima mundi* in Zoar, and the canons and jackdaws were simply different embodied modicums of this. I read the Fourth Book of the Georgics with Mr. Moddle.

I suppose it will detract from the interest of my story, should these rough notes ever expand into one, when I confess that my family does not belong to the upper stratum of the Zoar formation (I have dabbled a little in natural science, still with Mr. Moddle). My father keeps a shop, a very respectable place, established I am

afraid to say how many years ago, but still an unmitigated shop nevertheless, where he sells hats and coats to the sleek canons while alive, and from whence he issues with hatbands, plumes, and scarves to inter them when their vital spark rejoins the common stock. In this way I am enabled to hang on to the skirts of clerical life, though at a very respectful, and I fear not quite a respectable, distance. I have an idea that this commercial element is a great trial to my Uncle Edward, who is a solicitor and secretary to the Bishop, and has married a little deaf wife supposed to be genteel. Percy, whom I call my Protestant cousin, is his only son, and Incumbent of St. Simon Magus, in Zoar. He is very young, and some people wonder at his rapid preferment. He was ordained deacon and priest on consecutive days, and popped at once into the living of St. Simon Magus, which fell vacant very opportunely. Scandal said that the Bishop was "hard up," and my Uncle Edward "accommodated"

him ; but being such a small and religious place, I need scarcely say Zoar is great at gossip. I thought at the time that Percy's rapid promotion was only a recognition by the Bishop of his surpassing merits. I may as well confess at once that I have been always led to consider Percy as possessed of all the cardinal virtues, and to look upon him as my future husband. He is only a year or two my senior ; and when we were boy and girl together, the arrangement suited us admirably. When first we found out we were no longer boy and girl but man and woman, that is, when Percy, after taking his B.A. and passing the Voluntary, came to Zoar for Deacon's Orders, it became necessary to make some reference to this matrimonial arrangement, and the way it was done will afford an insight into Percy's plain, practical, business-like character, and also into the state of my affections. I am not quite clear about the latter myself just at this moment ; and possibly may not be inclined to make a full and unreserved con-

fession, even of what is patent to myself. Why should I? you are not a Father Confessor, good reader, are you?

Percy is a very decided Evangelical, principally, I fancy, for the reason that all the dignitaries at Zoar are mildly Puseyite; and he takes this opportunity of showing that he felt no obligation for his promotion, and of resenting their not asking him to their residence dinners. They never do; and I know Percy feels it acutely, and fancies they do it on account of my father being in business, though he pretends to think it is because he is a Simeonite. But I am digressing. I always feel a tendency to wander. This is what Percy said—

“ Well, Elsie, are you prepared to sign, seal, and deliver the contract between us made?” and he kissed me in a very cold cousin-like kind of way, not in the least like that he used to adopt when he caught me under the mistletoe, or occasionally without that excuse. Percy, I should add, was articled to his father before going to Cam-

bridge, which would account for the legal phraseology he adopted.

"Of course I am, Percy, if——"

"O if you are going into 'ifs,' going to introduce reservations or conditions, or anything of that sort, it will take us a very long time to settle a very simple matter."

"I thought it was all settled for us already," I replied. "I have never swerved from my engagement"—I very nearly said 'agreement,' because we really never have been formally engaged. "I only thought that, as you had been a good deal out in the world, while I had been staying at Zoar, you might have seen somebody you liked better."

"Leaving me to understand by implication that, if you had not been prisoned in Zoar, but had enjoyed the opportunity of going out into the world too, you might have seen somebody you liked better than me."

"It is possible, is it not?" What girl could resist the temptation of saying so much as that? "But you are very cross; or

no, I will not say that—the horrid Arch-deacon has been bothering you with his long examination, perhaps.”

“That doesn’t bother me,” replied Percy, with ineffable contempt. “The Bishop dares not reject me. I sent in blank papers on several subjects just to see whether they would even speak to me about them.”

As a fact they did not ; and Percy not only passed his examination, but had to read the Gospel, a compliment always shown to the candidate whose answers have been most satisfactory. I felt very proud of him when I went into one of those large pews, irreverently called “horseboxes,” at the cathedral. My Evangelical Aunt Phillis, and my great-aunt Rachel, were with me, and Percy’s father, my Uncle Edward, was in official attendance on the Bishop. He looked proud indeed as he stood there in the voluminous dress-coat which he wore on all occasions, and saw his only son kneel and receive from the Bishop imposition of hands, together with a twopenny New Testament sold under cost

price by a religious society, with a discount on taking a number. Percy is not altogether handsome, and perhaps a certain morose appearance, which he even then possessed, has grown upon him of late: but it was the first time I had seen him in his surplice, the white of which contrasted beautifully with his almost olive complexion and black curling hair. His father, my Uncle Edward, bears the most ridiculous resemblance to Charles James Fox, and though he is a Conservative in politics, he is exceedingly proud of the likeness.

Percy has now been some time Incumbent of St. Simon Magus, but I am glad to say does not urge the fulfilment of my matrimonial engagement. Of course it will have to be carried out one of these days, we both know that; but in the interim I have a little "affaire" on hand, and so—I happen to know in the most irregular way possible—has Percy. If ever he should find out anything about Alec, and speak to me, as he is sure to do, I shall twit him with Mary Baker. She

is the prima donna in his choir at St. Simon Magus, and certainly the prettiest girl in Zoar. Her mother is a poor widow woman who makes believe to keep a dressmaker's shop in the High Street, only some three or four doors above our house; but I fancy she has hardly any business; and how they manage to exist I cannot guess, for the children are always respectable, and Mary herself dresses, if anything, too smartly. Percy, I know, only gives her a mere pittance for singing at St. Simon's. He always was an excellent man of business, which my Uncle Edward says is the rarest thing among the clergy, and he has so much to do with them that he certainly ought to know. He thought a little drilling in a lawyer's office would be the best means of enabling Percy to get on in the Church.

"The Law first and then the Gospel, my dear," he said to me in reference to this subject. "When your prospective husband has one of the richest livings in the diocese, and, besides that, you have your Aunt Phillis's

money and possibly the Welsh estates, he will want all his business tact to manage so large a fortune."

"O, Uncle Edward," I replied, for I was in my gushing mood then, "I don't want to be rich. St. Simon's would be quite enough for me."

"Don't hint at such a thing, child. Percy won't stop at St. Simon's to be snubbed by the palace and the deanery, and as long as that shop remains in the High Street, so long he will be snubbed. He must exchange for a country living before you can be married; but I don't want him to hurry. He may make a good bargain if he finds some country incumbent anxious to bask in the light of the Bishop."

Nobody seems to want to hurry, which is very nice for Alec and myself under the circumstances. I am going to confess, not perhaps quite all, but a good deal about Alec in due course of time, but I must do it in my own desultory fashion or not at all. Mr. Moddle says I have not a logical mind, but then he

goes on to add, when had a woman ever a logical mind? Mr. Moddle can be as great a misogynist as Euripides himself when he likes, though sometimes he can be quite the reverse.

St. Simon Magus' church is on the outskirts of Zoar, at the extreme east end of the town, and in one of its least eligible suburbs, if it is possible to predicate suburban appendages of so very tiny a place. By going out at one of the side doors of the church, and crossing the fields, you can avoid the ineligible street, and passing by a large piece of water called the Fishponds—on the *lucus à non lucendo* principle, I fancy, for there are no fish—you get into a lonely picturesque lane, at the end of which you emerge into a high road leading past the Bishop's palace, and eventually into the market-place of Zoar. In this lonely and picturesque lane Alec and I had been taking an evening walk; and quite forgetting that it was practice night at St. Simon Magus, we omitted to part as we usually did before coming to the

Fishpond fields. We were just going to emerge from the gloom of the overhanging trees when Alec pulled me back and said—

“Your cousin Percy, look!”

Sure enough there he was at the stile leading from the fields into the lane, and with him was Mary Baker. They could not see us, though we were so close that we could not only see but hear them. I was astonished, but not indignant, to observe that when Mary came to the stile and as he lifted her over, he gave her not one, two, or three, but twenty kisses at least—quite unlike the cousinly dabs he gives me, and as she trotted down the lane he said, “Good night, darling,” and stopped watching her until she turned a corner out of sight. He then went slowly back through the fields to the church and home by the street I suppose, for, as John Bunyan says, “I saw him no more.”

I am saving up Alec for my next chapter, therefore I shall not say much about him now, except that after what we have seen I

feel less compunction than before in walking out with him; and such is the force of example that he at once imitated Cousin Percy by kissing me more than twenty times before I sped down the lane; indeed he would insist upon coming further with me than he had ever done before, running the most tremendous risks of meeting folks, for this was a favourite evening walk with the inhabitants of Zoar, and if one of them had seen us it would have been published all over the place that night. How Percy could risk being seen with Mary Baker I cannot guess; but perhaps he dreads the Bishop taking away his gown as little as he did his plucking him for Orders. He used to say he could never be sufficiently grateful to my Uncle Edward for accommodating his lordship, and thus putting the screw on him, though he thought his father ought to double the interest on account of the old prig not asking Percy or himself to dinner at the palace.

“I’ve piled it on as heavily as I can,

Percy," my uncle replied; "but after all, you cannot wonder that the Bishop and Dean don't ask us to dinner as long as that shop disfigures the High Street. Not only so, but William"—that was my father—"is ruining his business and dragging us down a step lower than before, if that were possible, in the social scale by joining the Dissenters and flitting about from sect to sect.

Our family name is Llewellyn, on the strength of which we are of course claimed as kindred by all who hail from the Principality; but it is a most humiliating thing to have to confess that our family tree does not strike root deeper than my grandfather; or, if it does, it is so profoundly buried in the soil that no ordinary heraldry can bring it to light. My grandfather might have been as autocthonous as Topsy herself. As regards his antecedents he was as mysterious as Melchizedek. From the date when our shop was established, there ought to have been a long lineal descent of Llewellyns; but perhaps it had changed

hands. Suffice it to say, I know nothing about my grandfather beyond the fact, that he was a fine greyheaded old gentleman, much respected by his fellow-townsmen, and that he died some years ago. Towards the close of his life, he was in a low desponding condition, for which most people held Mr. Moddle responsible—unjustly so, I think ; but although my uncle favoured this opinion, it did not interrupt his good fellowship with Mr. Moddle. I was young at the time ; but I remember it struck me that after my grandfather's death, my uncle seemed on better terms with Mr. Moddle than before. He certainly encouraged his visits to High Street, though pretending to dislike dissent, and as a rule Mr. Moddle breakfasts with us every Saturday morning, and dines at least once a week. I remember when he used to jump me in his arms ; but that was, of course, before my legs were a tithe of their present length. It sometimes strikes me, that he is dandling me mentally still. He treats me as though I were a grown-up

baby. I have once or twice asked him how it was my grandfather left the Topaz Farm equally divided between my father, my two uncles, and my Aunt Phillis.

"I thought it was only left to my grandfather for his lifetime, and to descend to my father at his death."

"Did you, indeed, my young Portia? Why don't you put your ideas in more legal phraseology?"

"Never mind the phraseology; let us stick to the idea, and talk sense."

"With which the law has nothing in common, you mean."

"I should not like Uncle Edward or Cousin Percy to hear me say so; but yes, I do mean that. Is it not a fact that old Mrs. Susanna Dash, who left the Topaz Farm to my grandfather, personally disliked my Uncle Edward, and said Samuel was a sniveller, but liked my father, as she did my grandfather?"

"There's your dear old Aunt Rachel, who never tires of talking on this subject, and

who will moreover enlighten you as to your Welsh estates, too. Why do you consult me, an outsider, on family matters?"

"Nonsense about Aunt Rachel. To whom shall I speak, if not to you, Mr. Moddle?"

"Your Aunt Phillis, your Uncle Edward himself. Why not?"

"Mention the subject in their presence, and they collapse forthwith. If they would only tell me to hold my tongue, or say something more impertinent still, I should resent it; but their stolid taciturnity gives me no chance."

"Then speak to your father."

"Dear good-natured old man, I try to get him on the topic, for I do not think he has been justly dealt by; but there is no keeping him to it. He is as warm as I am—almost as sanguine as I am—one moment. He takes a pinch of snuff, and that seems to change his whole nature. O, I wish I were a man instead of a woman. What can I do?"

"Write to Uncle Sam."

“Do you know, it’s a dreadful thing to say, but I cordially endorse old Susanna Dash’s appraisal of Uncle Sam. If she had included by anticipation his wife, my Aunt Patty, in the same category, I don’t think she would have been far wrong. They both snivel.”

“Really, Miss Elsie, you take stock of your belongings in a very merciless manner. What does your mother say?”

“You know well enough my mother would lie down any moment for the Juggernaut car of family respectability and peace to pass over her mutilated body.”

“Percy?”

“The most difficult of all; for he shuts me up by saying that we shall be married directly, and our interests identified. I have tried to pump Aunt Rachel as you suggest, but she has got the Topaz Farm so mixed up with the Welsh estates, which I believe to be simple castles in Spain—and she bothers her poor head so to find out the unpronounceable name of

that inheritance, and is generally so old and imbecile that I can do nothing with her."

Then Mr. Moddle subsides into his paper, with a look which says as plainly as words, "*I am not to be pumped, Miss;*" and I go into a brown study, and wonder whether I am really the victim of a conspiracy, got up by the uncles and aunts against my good-natured, but rather weak-minded papa, and whether that is the meaning of their being so anxious to marry me to Percy.

Most of all do I wonder whether, if such be the case, Mr. Moddle knows all about it. If so he is a capital actor. I have a notion that as long as the Saturday breakfasts and weekly dinners come round regularly, Mr. Moddle will let things take their course. If they failed, or the port wine grew inferior, I should not like to reckon on that gentleman's fidelity.

And yet Zoar is a dear dreamy old place, and the more I abuse it the better I like it, just as we do with our most intimate friends. We feel an inward conviction that they are

stupid, and cherish it as one of the greatest privileges of our association that we are able to tell them so point blank, and let them see by a hundred instinctive acts every day of our lives what our estimate of them is. I have not the slightest doubt that Orestes and Pylades bored one another sometimes, and that each was not only conscious of the fact, but made it perfectly obvious to the other that he was so. It is just the same with Zoar. When I hear my lackadaisical young-lady friends inveigh against its dullness, I sympathize with them verbally, and really fancy for the moment that I have a fellow-feeling in my heart. But if I ask myself here, over my diary, or when I am taking long country walks, solitary or otherwise (especially otherwise), whether I should like to say good-by to Zoar, I am quite determined that I should not. I have grown up in Zoar and become acclimatized; and very much doubt whether, when the inevitable exodus comes, I shall flourish so well anywhere else.

When I see Cockney tourists or visitors

of any kind "doing" Zoar, guide-book in hand, mooning about the cathedral green, or staring into the moat round the Bishop's palace, I know they are saying to themselves that it is a very picturesque old place, but that there must be a deal of still life in it. So there is ; but there is a good deal of life that is not still too.

I confess that my experience in Zoar is to a certain degree exceptional. Shop-keeper's daughter though I am, and mixed up, against my will, with influences that run counter to the received traditions among the *ton* of our cathedral city, I am treated as a lady by, and am actually on almost familiar terms with, those very dignitaries whom my clerical cousin and aspiring uncle with the genteel wife affect quite in vain.

The reason of this is, in the first place, that I have, by the merest fluke, got the reputation of being "clever." I hate the word, and really feel that it amounts almost to an insult when people use it in reference to me. They do, however ; and I know they do not

mean it as an insult, so I dare not resent it ; but I take a deeper revenge still. I laugh in my sleeve at them, and rather encourage the idea which I know to be utterly false. I am not in the least clever, nay, in many respects I know myself to be below the level even of commonplace ; but I possess the power of holding my tongue, and not letting everybody see that I am not clever. When I am analysing myself—and I do a good deal in that way—I am always reminded of the story of the Aberdeen lad who was in love, as most Aberdeen lads are, with a Scotch lassie ; whilst, as will sometimes occur, another lad loved the same lassie. The second lad was in the seafaring line, and brought home from a voyage a parrot, which he presented to the object of his affections. This parrot was a capital talker, and amused the pretty lassie immensely. The first swain would not be outdone in generosity ; but, not being a sailor, parrots were out of his line. He therefore bought an owl and bestowed it on this nymph with two strings

to her bow. After a time he asked her how she liked the bird, and her reply was favourable (I fancy the sailor lad had gone on another voyage just then). She said the bird did not talk like Poll, it was true; but still he had "a power o' thocht in him." That is the case with me. I do not talk much, and people think I must have a power of thought in me.

For seven years, from my thirteenth to my twentieth summer, I went every day to Mr. Moddle; and while my young-lady friends were studying the accomplishments and general inutility at the various boarding-schools in Zoar, I was reading Greek, Latin, German, French, and mathematics with my eccentric but clever instructor. I only went to him from ten to one, so that I had plenty of time to pick up my drawing and practise my music. Thus I did not fall behind in my accomplishments, while the undivided attention I got from Mr. Moddle enabled me to get over a good deal of ground in my heavier studies, and so—how I smile as I

write it—stamped me among the Zoar magnates as a genius.

The Dean, for instance, who was provost of a college at one of the universities, heard that I had read the Nicomachean Ethics—my father was always fond of boasting about my doings—and this very reverend gentleman actually asked me to call at the Deanery and talk over the subject with him, for he was great at moral science himself. I went, nothing doubtful, for I felt on secure ground in this my favourite study, and actually had the felicity of seeing him smile at my understanding and answers, and of being invited to luncheon with Mrs. Dean, to whom he introduced me in the following terms—

“Here, my dear, is a young lady—Miss Llewellyn—my wife—who has mastered Aristotle, and has charmed me with her discussion of Whately’s Logic. You must know one another.”

From that time forth Mrs. Dean used continually to drive up to the shop door and

wait for me to take an airing with her, I need scarcely say to the wonder and admiration of the High Street; for Jews and Samaritans were on friendly terms compared with the hard and fast line which is drawn between the Church and the World in Zoar as a rule. I am the solitary exception; and I owe my exception mostly to the fact that I am clever.

“What a pity it is,” the Bishop was once known to say in private, “that my secretary’s son and that draper’s daughter can’t change sexes. He is an offensive nincompoop, with nothing in his head but Simeonite nonsense and radical ideas; whereas she is not only clever but——”

But what do you think? I really do not like to write the word, because it looks like a mockery. I was religious. Now, although I hope I am not irreligious any more than I should like to be a perfect fool, yet I have no more title to be called religious than I have to be set down as clever.

This is how the idea arose.

Zoar is celebrated not only as being the head-quarters of the clergy *in esse* for the diocese, but also for the education of the clergy *in posse*. It is the seat of a celebrated theological college, where graduates who are desirous of following up their secular studies with some more definite preparation for orders, work for a year at theology, and acquire a Testimonium which is very highly appreciated by most of the Bishops; by all indeed except the extreme Low Church party, for we are looked upon as carrying things with rather a high hand in Zoar.

These theological students, who are generally about fifty in number, serve, as I need scarcely say, to keep Zoar alive: and if I must be very honest and outspoken indeed, it was as much to see the students as because I liked the cathedral service that I began to go twice a day directly after I ceased to study at Mr. Moddle's. I was speaking at random when I said only some half dozen people went to cathedral. Of course the choir and canons would amount to consider-

ably more than that; but there are also the divinity students who go twice a day, and the ladies who, like myself, go because the students do. When I spoke as I did to Percy I must have been thinking of vacation time, when there are no students, and no ladies—and probably the congregation does not average more than six, mostly old almshouse people, nearly all of whom I notice wear white cotton night caps during the service, for the cathedral is draughty.

I go regularly, not only in term time, but through the vacations. This I do, really not to save appearances, or even to keep up my acquaintance with the dean, but I enjoy the quiet daily service of praise in that beautiful old cathedral. It seems to me the sublimation of Zoar existence. I get unmercifully laughed at by Percy, who says I sacrifice myself on the shrine of respectability during the vacation so as to be able to go with decency during term-time. Mr. Moddle asks me what spirituality I find in the squeaking choristers and the gusty organ, and whether

I think God likes to be addressed only in the key of G by a musical minor canon.

Whenever they take this tone I collapse just as they do on the subject of the Topaz Estates. My father and mother—dear old souls!—Dissenters though they are, encourage my church-going. My father says it must be better to serve God that way than not at all; whereupon my Uncle Edward generally makes some coarse observation to the effect that he is behind the scenes and knows how much real religion there is in church dignitaries.

“It may pay perhaps to bring the girl into contact with the bigwigs—confound them!—but if I had a daughter I would rather she kept clear of them.”

How devoutly he wishes his son could be as hail fellow well met with them as I am. That again is, I am quite aware, an additional reason why he wants Percy and me to marry.

My Uncle Samuel and Aunt Patty once wrote me a joint letter of remonstrance on the subject of what they chose to call my

“Romanizing tendencies,” and Aunt Phillis girds occasionally in the same strain ; but I answered the former in a long letter, only touching upon the subject in a postscript of three lines : and when Aunt Phillis, having eaten something that disagrees with her, gets on that topic, I treat her to a similar verbal postscript, if I may so express myself, that is, I talk volubly on some indifferent topic, and throw in a polite word or two at the end which, rightly interpreted, would be—

“Shut up.”

It is a sight to see us of a Sunday morning, going our different ways to church. My father struts preternaturally early for Mr. Moddle’s chapel, in which my revered parent holds office. He says he goes so early on account of official duties ; but my private opinion is, that it is to avoid meeting the people going to church. My father was an excellent churchman once, and is not so bigoted now but that he sometimes attends St. Hilda’s, the incumbent of which

is one of the canons of the cathedral. My mother goes with him generally, that is, she attends the same place of worship, following him when she has seen the rest of the household off. She is the Broadest church-woman I ever knew, and would attend the worship of any sect that set up its tabernacle in Zoar, from the Pope down to Mrs. Girling. She holds the grand essentials, and cares nothing for the externals, of Faith and Worship. As soon as the musical old chimes ring forth from the grey towers, I start for cathedral, where I am privileged to share a horsebox with the dean and canons' ladies, and from which I have a capital view of the students in general, and Alec in particular; or, at least, I used to have when he was one of that theological half hundred. I generally meet my Uncle Edward and Percy, and sometimes my deaf aunt, en route from their snug house in the College Gardens to the church in East Zoar. My Uncle Edward is churchwarden, and sits in a pew lined with dark blue cloth, with two large maces

planted like standards in the corners. Lastly, my aunts Phillis and Rachel, who lodge over Mrs. Baker's shop, and whom nothing on earth will persuade to attend Percy's ministrations, toddle off to St. Hilda's, and so we are all provided for.

It is astonishing how quickly the weekdays go by in Zoar, and how soon the Sundays seem to come round again. When you have anything like a double daily service to mark off the day into definite portions, it aids the flight of time wonderfully. I fancy that monks and nuns who recite the offices regularly in choir must be greatly conscious of this. My day at Zoar generally proceeds somewhat after this fashion.

We rise at eight, and, as soon as my father has seen the shop opened, and set business going, we have breakfast and family prayers. Then I help my mother in domestic affairs, for I am very careful not to let either my alleged cleverness or religion interfere with my capacity for making puddings. This brings on ten o'clock, which

is the hour for week-day morning service at the cathedral. The green is quite lively with students walking up and down, in their trencher caps and B.A. gowns, as well as with the chorister boys who are coming out of the Grammar School, where they are foundationers, and playing all sorts of tricks as they pass from school to church. I am often exercised to think why it is that choristers are generally a shade more tricky than other lads, just as they say clergymen's children are. Is it, I wonder, because they see, as my Uncle Edward would say, "behind the scenes," and so acquire a fatal familiarity with religious and moral concerns? Cousin Percy was on the foundation for a time himself, and I have heard it whispered, did not leave with very flying colours; but I never knew particulars, and have reason to believe he is biassed when he inveighs against choir schools as sinks of iniquity.

Say what unimpressionable people may, an early musical service does give a tone

to the day, and I feel it constantly when I come home, and sit down to my books and papers directly afterwards. I can write better. I feel decidedly more religious and certainly not less clever. Those ridiculous terms!

We dine at the primitive hour of one, in the low oaken parlour behind the shop; and my mother and I get things ready, with the help of one old servant, Hannah, who is the very type of Zoar itself in appearance and character. She is one of those old-fashioned domestics who have no idea that people ever grow up. She speaks to me and thinks of me as a mere child, and annoys Percy considerably by always alluding to him as "Master Percy," just as she did when he used to come foraging for apples or plums into the High Street kitchen. At three there is afternoon service at the cathedral, and before or after that I walk—sometimes, as I said, alone, sometimes otherwise. Frequently I defer my constitutional altogether until the evening, and get

a second spell at my books and writing in the afternoon. Tea at five and supper at nine conclude our day.

Now if this kind of thing were going on to the end of the book as well as the chapter, it would be obviously impossible to extract a story from it. I doubt whether the highest creative faculty which even Mr. Moddle could imagine would be able to surround these short and simple annals with anything like interest. But then I have a supreme conviction that all this is not going to last. I am not sure whether I am glad or sorry to think so, but the conviction is there. As far as one can see there is every element of stability in the present arrangement of affairs, unless indeed my inevitable marriage with Percy alters matters. Why do I use that word "inevitable," I wonder?

Am I shaken by that Mary Baker episode? I suppose I ought to be. Some people say there is no true love without jealousy. I know not how that may be,

but I am not the least jealous. Perhaps two wrongs do make one right after all. Possibly Alec and Mary Baker, like two quantities on different sides of an equation, cancel one another; "go out" and leave Percy and me standing alone. Certain it is that neither Alec nor I seem at all conscious of the just cause or impediment which of course Percy ought to form to our "otherwise" rambles. I often wonder whether Percy knows anything of my "affaire;" if so, he is as philosophical as I am. Here he is. I will submit him to a pumping process, and note the results.

"Percy, dear," I said to him, after receiving with my best grace his single cousinly salute, "will you take me for a short walk round the palace before service? It wants yet a quarter of an hour before the bells begin."

"Always service, Elsie. I wish I could understand this penchant of yours for church."

"Rather a remarkable observation for a

minister of the gospel to make, my dear cousin, is it not?"

"Don't call me 'cousin,' there's a good girl. It reminds me of our relationship, which I am not at all sure does not come within the prohibited degrees."

"Indeed. Shall we kiss and part then?"

"Put on your bonnet and let us walk as you propose."

"And do our kissing and parting *al fresco*, in some romantic lane, or halting by a rustic stile," the spirit of mischief prompted me to say. But Percy either did not hear what I said (he is often *distract*), or else is a splendid actor. He never winced. "You don't approve of kissing in public, I am sure, do you?" I continued.

"Certainly not."

Cato the censor could not have given his judgment with greater gravity.

"There's that blackguard, Alec Lund," he said, giving me a verbal side-blow, as we passed under the crumbling old archway that led to the Bishop's palace; we saw

Alec ahead of us under the giant elms. "Where does he raise funds to enable him always to be sucking away at a big cigar, I wonder; and who is that he is taking off his hat to? Why, it's Mary Baker," he added. "Where can she have been at this time of day?"

"Taking a constitutional, like ourselves, I suppose," said I in reply, glad that something had occurred to prevent his seeing my indignant look when he spoke of Alec Lund as a blackguard. "The only difference is she is alone and we are en tête-à-tête."

"I don't believe in the solitary walks of pretty milliners," he answered. "If I thought she had come out to meet Lund I'd discharge her from my choir on the spot."

He would not have done anything of the kind; and I knew it; but I wonder whether he knew that I knew it?

Mary passed us with a nod and a blush, and Alec shot on ahead when he saw us

coming, his big cigar emitting quite a volume of smoke in the fresh breeze, and making him look like a human locomotive.

"I cannot understand a man's liking for tobacco," Percy said, more for the sake of saying something than because he felt strongly on the subject of nicotine. I could not help thinking, if we could only have paired off there and then as Fate had evidently arranged it, how much more satisfactory it would have been for all parties.

"Can't you?" I rejoined. "To me there seems something so companionable in a pipe or cigar."

"So it's generally supposed. I wonder, Elsie, you have not taken up smoking in addition to your other exceptional accomplishments."

He was awfully jealous on the score of my character for cleverness ; much more so than he would have been could he have known the whole truth about Alec.

Thank goodness, the bells rang out at

last, though the quarter of an hour seemed as though it was never going to end. I had done my duty, and felt the approval of conscience; and two individuals whom destiny had ill assorted, ceased to bore one another, as I wended my way to church and Percy went to do parochial visiting in East Zoar.





CHAPTER II.

A CLERK OF OXENFORD.

THREE years ago, just when I was discontinuing my regular studies with Mr. Moddle, Alexander Lund, an Oxford graduate, was among the batch of new theological students who came to Zoar after graduating at their respective universities. Report spoke highly of his abilities, and I was assured by the dean that his place on the class list by no means fairly represented his powers, for he could have done much better had he simply taken the trouble, and it would be his own fault if he did not walk over the course for a Fellowship. This interested me in Mr. Lund before I saw him, and I occupied a good deal of time that first Sunday of term at the cathedral in picking out from the

new arrivals the interesting graduate whose abilities so far exceeded his ambition. Such a preponderance is rare. I verily believe most young men now-a-days do think themselves about on a level with the Admirable Crichton. I am certainly no disciple of Spurzheim or Lavater, for I selected a little bright-eyed man, who looked "clever;" but I found afterwards he was a nonentity who had been "gulfed" to any extent, while the last man I should ever have expected turned out to be my hero—a tall, handsome, rather—but only rather—overdressed Adonis, wearing a moustache which was not so common then as it has grown to be since, and altogether a man who I should have supposed would have over-rated rather than under-rated his own abilities. He was more of the type of clerk I had seen going into the City on the knifeboard of an omnibus, when I had been staying in London, than the conventional clerk of Oxenford. I never could—or indeed can—fancy Alec Lund taking orders; yet

there he was among a batch of theologs, and really the last I should have selected as my typical scholar. This leads me to reflect how very seldom persons, places, or events come up—or down—to the ideas we have formed of them beforehand. They are generally greater or smaller than our preconceptions. Alec was greater in some respects, smaller in others, than the picture I had drawn of him in my imagination. The coming event did not, in this case, cast its shadow before.

Until his arrival at Zoar I had not known any of the theological students, though I believe most of them knew me, for I have a sort of reputation. It does not take much to make or mar a reputation in Zoar, and my imputed cleverness and actual association with the Very Reverend the Dean were quite enough to render me an object of interest with the newly-fledged graduates at Zoar Theological College. My first introduction to Alec was quite a romantic affair: indeed, I ought not to speak of an

introduction at all, for really there was none. We omitted that little ceremony ; and now I come to look back over what I perhaps somewhat romantically call “ the past,” I am glad that such was the case. I am glad, I mean, that there has been, from first to last, up to the present time, nothing formal or commonplace in our association. I seldom dare to look forward to the future, because, as I said, I am Cousin Percy’s “ intended”—how I hate that word!—but I feel that, come what may, there can never be anything of what Alec calls the Act of Parliament kind between him and me. I know it is very wrong—I see myself in the looking-glass opposite blushing as I write the words ; but I am purely happy in my association with Alec, and the mere circumstance of writing down how our acquaintance originated is in itself a pleasure. How we love to linger upon past scenes of happiness, especially when there has not been—though there may be yet—anything to mar that happiness. In fact, the possibility of its

coming to an end lends just a spice of romance to one's bliss, like the dash of acidity in a condiment that might else pall from its very sweetness.

Zoar is great in walks. On all sides of the tiny city stand the grand old hills, often crowned with the most delicious woods ; and when I have climbed one of these hills and am sitting among the bluebells in the woods, or pacing up and down in autumn-tide while the red leaves flutter to the ground in the October sun, I think there is no place so beautiful as my dear little native city, nestling down below with its grey cathedral and red brick houses. I used to think autumn sad until I met Alec Lund ; but it was just on one of those warm days of waning summer, and precisely upon one of the grand old Zoar hills, that we came together ; and the circumstance seems to have had what I may call almost the same Christianizing effect upon my previous views of decay in Nature which I notice religion often has upon one's idea of death.

Autumn is the death-tide of the year, and that was why I used to think it sad. It is so still; but since that meeting with Alec Lund it no longer seems sad at all.

I had drawn down upon myself all sorts of badinage from Percy and Mr. Moddle, and any amount of remonstrances from my mother for leaving the house that dark October morning when it had been raining as usual at Zoar, and steering for Dovecot Hill, on which the clouds still hung heavy, and the sun strove in vain to make his appearance through them. There was something to me indescribably fascinating in the grim grey clouds festooning the summit of my favourite hill; and I was particularly fond of noting the effect of such a sky upon the landscape. Besides, I wanted to meditate. I had already put some things on paper, not with the most distant idea of publication, but simply for the pleasure of rendering permanent the impressions made on my mind and fancy by the beauties of Zoar. To me there seems something as

formal in publishing what one has written under such circumstances, as in getting engaged and married, as compared with the informal kind of affection existing between me and Alec. But there, I am anticipating—and wandering as usual.

I was pacing sentinel-like up and down the summit of Dovecot Hill, which was really a very respectable eminence indeed, a bluff, rocky acclivity without a tree or shrub upon it, and generally peopled by nothing but the sheep which cropped the short crisp herbage growing on and between the blue masses of the limestone. I thought if anybody had been there to see me, I must have appeared like one of the witches in Macbeth bent on no good, or Hecate on the look-out to see that those same witches did not do any mischief beyond what was befitting their position in her weird society.

Somebody *was* there to see me !

“ Good morning, Miss Llewellyn,” said a mysterious voice, which seemed to come

from the very innermost recesses of one of the limestone rocks.

I started, of course, but I did not scream, as most women would have done. I know it is expected of one under certain circumstances, and that it is considered rather unfeminine to omit it; but I like setting at nought the *convenances*, so I did omit the scream on this occasion, and before I saw who had addressed me, or indeed was quite certain it was not the limestone rock itself, I replied—

“Good morning, whoever you are.”

Then I looked, and saw a man coiled up in a little nest of rock, with an umbrella forming a sort of canopy over him, and in this remarkable position reading his book and smoking his cigar. I cannot think how it was I failed to smell the latter, for I was close to the smoker.

“I really must apologize for taking your name in vain,” said he, struggling in the most ridiculous way to get out of his sarcophagus; “but it is so unusual to see a

human being here, that I could have no more remained silent than Robinson Crusoe could under the circumstances."

Then I saw that it was Alec, for he had got out of his nest and was shaking himself clear from the moss and lichens that were clinging to his rough frieze shooting-coat.

"And how did you know my name, Mr. Lund?" I said, determined to let him know that I was acquainted with his too.

"How did you know mine?"

"We soon get to know the students' names—I really don't know how; besides, your fame reached me through the Dean."

"Precisely as yours reached me. We are, I hear, fellow-students. I fear I almost wrong you by coupling you in this way with myself, for my studies are very desultory. See, I am reading, not Butler or Hooker, as I ought to be, but John Keats."

Now here, I suppose, was the first false step. It sounds rather in the last-dying-

speech-and-confession style to say so, and I really don't feel that I have done, or am going to do, anything so very wrong. I have only got two strings to my bow, which is, I have reason to believe, nothing so very exceptional.

I ought, no doubt, to have run swiftly down the hill, like the Gadarene herds, directly that voice came from the limestone rock, or, at all events, directly I found it did not come from a limestone rock alone, but from a real live flesh-and-blood man, more especially when that man was a theological student, and most especially of all, when that theological student was Alec Lund.

I did not.

"Hence these tears," some would say; only there are not going to be any tears. Why should there be tears? There have been only smiles as yet. Most of the sunshine, or at least the brightest portion of that which has irradiated my path, seems to be only an extension of the ray which shot so

suddenly and strangely across it that sombre October morning on Dovecot Hill.

"It so happens that my own tastes incline especially to the Cockney school of poets in general, and to John Keats in particular," I replied—most indiscreetly Mrs. Grundy or Mr. Moddle would, of course, inform me. Mr. Moddle is a sort of male adaptation of Mrs. Grundy to my own individual case.

"Then I no longer apologize in the faintest degree for having addressed you, because I feel, and I think you will feel too, that in such sympathy as you confess there is the germ of something far too enjoyable to forfeit for any mere conventionality."

"I hate conventionality."

There was what Sydney Smith calls a brilliant flash of silence. Mr. Lund (I will not go on calling him Alec just yet, I think) stood looking at me with all his eyes, as they say; that is, his full, lustrous brown eyes were a degree wider open than I have subsequently found to be their normal con-

dition. He has long ago confessed to me that he fell over head and ears in love with me there and then. This brilliant flash of silence seems to afford a good opportunity for describing my hero—for he was my hero on the spot—a little more minutely than I have done. Men look so much alike when they are done up in B.A. gowns as though they were at a funeral, and with their faces made up too, for the purpose of going through an enforced service in cathedral. Now he was in a natural pose that would have been invaluable to a photographer.

Here is his photograph. He was—I write in the past tense, because I am chronicling a reminiscence—a fine, tall, broad-chested man of five-and-twenty. Of his hirsute adornment I have already spoken, and the soft felt hat he wore seemed, if I may so say, to harmonize with his face and features. How seldom is this the case. A man with the head of an Antinous will decorate himself with the hat of a counter jumper, or the shirt-collar of a Yankee

storekeeper. It is a pity, but true nevertheless, that we depend so much for our likes and dislikes upon these artificial adjuncts of the outward man. The great charm of this costume was the utter absence of all effort. The rough frieze suit was of fluffy iron-grey, and the loose shirt-collar was fastened negligently with a voluminous black silk tie, the ends of which floated gaily on the breezes of Dovecot Hill. I hate jewellery, as a rule, for men, and he wore none, beyond a heavy watch-chain with pendant seals, and a massive signet ring. His hair, as I could see when he removed his hat for a moment and ran his hand through his curls, was cut short, and of so deep a brown as to appear almost black. I wonder whether I have at all succeeded in placing Alec (I must call him so sometimes) fairly before my readers. I want to do so, because I am most desirous of accounting for the fact that there and then I fell desperately in love with him, as he with me. Of course I cannot be ex-

pected to explain the latter circumstance, can I?

When he again broke the silence I seemed to have become quite familiar with his voice. We might have been standing staring speechlessly at each other an age or so, there on the top of Dovecot Hill, Zoar. Perhaps we did! Time is measured less by seconds, minutes, and hours, than by sensations. It seems to me that we must have stood for years, at all events, only I think, in that case I should have found things more changed than I did in Zoar, when I came, like Moses, down from the mount; I say advisedly "like Moses," for when I descended, and got home, my mother said to me—

"Well, Elsie, I am glad you did set at nought my advice and have your walk, for it has evidently done you good. Does she not look well, Mr. Moddle?" It was one of Mr. Moddle's dining days.

"Radiant as Hebe," responded Mr. Moddle, and became absorbed in the *Times* again,

after giving me a long, steady, admiring look.

Percy was there too, and regarded Mr. Moddle in a way that made me think he would have liked to call him out, or, at least, to say something very cutting. He did not say anything at all.

But to return to the summit of Dovecot Hill and the source of my radiancy. How curiously our emotions write themselves upon our faces !

Alec—I must call him Alec now—looked at me in a way that made me think he was going to propose on the spot. I am sure we did, both of us, live a lifetime in those few moments of silence. Then he continued, in a tone that would have led a third party to think we were very old acquaintances—

“ I do not pretend to read all the Chaldean lore that is inscribed upon a woman’s face at one cursory glance, but I thought I was not wrong in my interpretation of yours——”

“To the effect?”

“That, as you have just told me, you hated conventionalities. People told me differently.”

“People! Who?”

“My fellow students; the men who have been here longer than I.”

“Do they discuss me?”

“Do we discuss you? of course. What else is there to do in Zoar?”

“How nice. And what did they tell you about me?”

“Shall I speak openly?”

“Quite.”

“They told me you were a prim blue-stocking, with a stand-at-a-distance-don't-you-come-anigh-me air about you, which made you a fit companion only for that old prig the Dean, or—or——”

“Yes; go on.”

“That younger prig, to whom they told me you were engaged to be married, the Rev. Percy Llewellyn.”

"They seem to know my affairs very accurately."

"Then it is true, is it?"

"I did not say so. I only mean they seem posted up in all the reports, true or false, that attach to me."

"I repeat, What else have they—have we—to do? Yes; they know all about your Aristotelian confabs with the Dean, and I believe could tell you the subject of conversation with Mrs. Dean during your last drive."

"What Paul Prys you are."

"We are. We get into a narrowish groove at college, and here it becomes even more contracted. It is our qualification for curate-life."

"But you are not going to be a curate?"

"Why not? Why else am I here?"

"True; but——"

"But what? Why should I not be a curate? I will be a curate." He spoke quite warmly, as though I had been opposing his entrance into the ministry.

I smiled.

“Excuse my petulance,” he said, answering my smile, “but because I read a volume of English literature instead of a crambook or a goody volume, people exclaim, ‘*You* going to be a clergyman!’ Because I venture to think for myself on questions where people consent as a rule to be led by the nose, they look quite horrified at the idea of my passing even the portals of the sanctuary; why I cannot imagine.”

“Why, indeed?” I echoed, in a very profound brown study.

“I am keeping you standing here all this time,” he said, “when I ought to be doing the honours of my nest. I call this my nest because I mount up here when I want to be out of the cackle of the Paul Prys. Try it. The sun is up above the mists now, and you will not feel cold.”

I actually climbed up and sat down in the nest, and found it very comfortable except that my legs required a good deal of coiling up to get them well in.

“I have the greatest confidence in your

opinion," he continued, "because while I have found that you are not the mere blue-stocking my fellow-students make you out, my own observation assures me that you are very many strata above the ordinary run of female society; and even if you were not, a woman sees these matters more intuitively than a man. Tell me, do you think because I am inclined to exercise to the very full the free thought and private judgment I possess, I ought to avoid the ministry of the Church of England?"

"On the contrary, I think it the very reason why you should seek it. The Church of England wants such men as you."

How very odd it was that he should, after so brief an acquaintance, be asking me questions about the conduct of his life, and I answering him in this oracular manner. He looked at me again in the same significant way as before, and went on—

"They told me too that you were religious in the vulgar stereotyped sense of that most misused word. You come to

cathedral, they said—but no, I dare not tell you that.”

“To look at the students?”

“Thanks. Yes; to see and to be seen: but your heart, they added, was bestowed upon the Calvinist of East Zoar. Did you know they called your cousin that?”

“No.”

“Is it a fair title?”

I could not deny it. Percy is Evangelical to the very boots.

“Yes, it is not unfair; but it is most unfair to say that my sympathies incline towards his cold system.”

“I see it is: but then your family are, some of them, Dissenters.”

I wondered whether he knew what we had for dinner yesterday, or the precise amount of my father’s account at the bank.

“How can you see it is unfair in my case?” I asked. “Are you clairvoyant?”

“In some cases, where I choose to take the trouble to see, I believe I am.”

“And is mine a case where you *choose to take the trouble?*”

This seemed rather like fishing; but I was relieved to find that he knew about my engagement to Percy, and therefore would not be likely to think I wanted him to propose to me on the spot.

“I have, in the course of twenty-five years of actual existence, or say four or five years, during which I have been capable of making such an intellectual observation, met about three people, perhaps, whose characters appeared worth investigating. You are one of the three.”

“I am honoured, of course.”

“Not by any means. All I say is, there is evidently in our cases some mutual association, some occult rapport that makes the examination either of other interesting, and perhaps edifying. I am not wrong in supposing you would like to know something of my history and character, I am sure. You would now, would you not?”

“Immensely.”

“Arrange yourself a little more comfortably in my nest, which scarcely seems to suit you as well as it does me, and I will tell you.”

I tried to focus my legs, for they began to feel cramped already.

“Stop me if I bore you. Promise me that.”

I promised; and he told me his story.

He had suffered from loneliness, he said, all his life—now extending over a quarter of a century (how much longer that sounds than twenty-five years!). He had no recollection whatever of either father or mother who had died when he was quite young, leaving him tolerably well provided for as far as money and a guardian went, but with the impression, so much more terrible to a child than to an adult, that he was a waif and stray on the ocean of existence; that there was no particular purpose served in his being born, and that he was rather in the way than otherwise in the world.

“I did not,” he said (for I shall quote

sometimes), "curse the day of my birth formally and in set terms like Job and Dean Swift; but I looked upon it as a mistake, and I am not quite sure I see the *raison d'être* yet."

All his boyish life was passed at two schools, one kept by a grim old lady who did her best to ignore the existence of a score of such waifs and strays committed to her keeping. She did not murder their bodies like the baby-farmers—that would not have paid—but her system effectually stamped out anything like hope, ambition, or emulation from them. As long as the days went monotonously by without "rows," she and they were pleased. If they liked to learn they learned, if they did not they remained ignorant. Alec Lund did learn, because, as he said, he was obliged to do something, and learning and reading kept him out of the "rows" which his little companions got into through idleness and mischief. The system was an admirable one for turning out either philosophers or

fools. Alec Lund flattered himself he had managed to struggle into the former category. The very large proportion joined the great communion and fellowship of fools.

From this moral and intellectual baby-farmer's he went to a semi-public school in London, boarding with one of the masters, and having no holidays because he had nowhere to spend them. The school was an overgrown one, so that the boys were again able to work or not as they pleased, and the master with whom Alec boarded, though an able man in his way, was obliged to eke out a slender income and maintain a long family by taking a curacy as well as his mastership, so that he had no time to devote to his pupils out of school. From his earliest years, therefore, to the time when he went up to the University, Alec had been thrown entirely on himself, and it seemed to him, as it seems to me, marvellous that he did not go wrong. The income to which he succeeded when he came of age was moderate and entirely under his own control, so

that he might easily have squandered it had he been so inclined.

“My guardian,” he added, at the conclusion of this epoch of his own existence, “was only too glad to wash his hands of me, and when I sat down in my little skyparlour in a second-rate college at Oxford, I felt about as thoroughly alone in the world as it is possible to do; but as I had never felt anything else it did not affect me, and I thought then, as I think now, that there are advantages which more than compensate for any imaginary drawbacks in such a hermit style of existence. Social complications are exceedingly embarrassing.”

There was again that peculiar look on Alec's face which told me that the social complication between us two, so far as it had then gone, was neither embarrassing nor unpleasant to him. He was not the only man whom I, even in my limited sphere, had seen try to assume a stoic virtue, though he had it not. I always forget whether Tommy or Harry was the naughty

brother who was always saying, "I don't care;" but there are a good many grown-up Tommys or Harrys extant in society.

I knew the academical antecedents of my recent acquaintance from the Dean, and was able, in my turn, to act female Paul Pry in estimating his exact chance of a fellowship.

"What a world it is!" he exclaimed. "You seem to discuss us students as microscopically as we do the ladies."

"The 'ladies' do. But I associate very little with my own sex. All my information about you comes from the deanery."

"And the Very Reverend thinks me safe for a fellowship if I try, does he? I shall try certainly, because a fellowship leads to the nice monastic anti-social life which I have made my ideal."

I knew he had not made this his ideal, and felt pretty sure would not try for the fellowship.

"And is that why you are about to take Orders?" I asked, conscious of my impertinence in doing so.

“ If it were so I should certainly wait for my possible election, and use my fellowship as my title to Orders. No ; I shall go and bury myself in some remote village as curate ; and if I do try for a fellowship, and get it, simply transfer my hermit’s cell from Somersetshire to Oxford—that is, if my views do not materially alter in the meantime.”

I had no distinct conception then why that last saving clause seemed to cause me such intense relief. I do not think I should have come down at all Moses-like from the mount if he had not added it.

“ Now, Miss Llewellyn,” he said, when he saw me begin to fidget in my nest, partly because it was time to go, partly from the fact that my legs could bear it no longer, “ I will not embarrass you by offering to accompany you on your road home, though I should like to. But I know the proneness of Zoar to gossip, and will re-occupy my nest after I have seen you just over the brow of the hill. May I go so far ?”

I told him he might, and was glad to feel my legs getting less stiff, or he would have thought me more ungraceful than I really was.

“Neither, again, do I wish to make anything like an ‘appointment,’ unless quite agreeable to yourself; but if, on any other glorious October morning”—the sun was shining brightly then—“you deign to visit this nest among the clouds, we can have another interesting confab—more interesting than this one, because you can tell me your autobiography instead of listening to the scanty details of mine.”

Mine, I told him, could be summed up in a monosyllable—*nil*; but I did promise to visit him at the nest on the following morning.

“It is a pity,” he said, as we stood on the brow of Dovecot Hill and looked down at the magnificent panorama glowing in the sunshine, and flushed with autumnal tints, “to lose this. We must not reckon on many more fine days this side of winter.”

The autumn was a very lingering one in that particular year ; and when it was gone, we took particular pleasure in studying fog-effects in the woods and fields. Then our proclivities leaned towards snow and frost. In a word, we were never tired of noting the varied influences of sun and shade on the country around my beautiful Zoar.

At the end of the year's course, Alec passed his theological examination with much credit at Zoar ; but deliberately refused all offers of curacies, and did not present himself as a candidate for a fellowship. He retained his lodgings just as when he had been a student ; but cast his cap and gown to the winds, and settled down to hermit life at Zoar with—as he chose to express it—"one fair spirit" for his minister. That was myself. I rather reproached—and still reproach—myself for the mute inglorious ease into which I feel sure I was the original cause of his drifting ; but his companionship was from the first so very dear to me, that

I was not unselfish enough to take the step I knew I ought to take, and counsel him to leave Zoar—and me.

Of course people noticed it. It is something more than a nine days' wonder still; and if Percy was a different kind of man from what he is, all would have been arranged for Alec and me long ago, without our being forced to take any active steps in bringing about our own misery ourselves. It is now, however, quite evident to both of us that Percy does not care in the least for me, and is only going to marry me for family purposes and from an interested motive.

Is he going to marry me?

It would, I am quite sure, be as impossible for Alec as for me to set down the time when our acquaintance, from being the purely intellectual one it was at first, definitely assumed a warmer complexion, though we did fall in love at first sight. It was, I suppose, inevitable that it should do so, for when I look in the glass I am conscious of not being altogether repulsive,

and Alec is certainly a handsome man. Besides this, our tastes run remarkably in unison. Given these premises, the conclusion was pretty certain to follow. When, where, or how it happened deponent sayeth not, but we became openly and consciously, as far as we two were concerned, what we had been from the first moment we met at the nest on Dovecot Hill—lovers. We were only not recognised as such because, I very much regret to say, walking out with the theological students was not quite so exceptional on the part of the young ladies of Zoar as it might have been. Besides, my intercourse with the deanery had from the first given a colour to my acquaintance with the students which my female companions could have scratched my eyes out for possessing. The circumstance went far to prevent my being “talked about” as they were; and there was nothing remarkable in my continuing my acquaintance with Alec after he ceased to be a student, and became an integral part of the population of Zoar.

Though he was in it, however, he was scarcely of it, and I fancy has rather avoided becoming acquainted with my family than otherwise. When he says anything about it, he attributes his unsociability to the hermit life he had laid down for himself as his ideal.

To the circumstance of his not taking Orders I am not quite reconciled. The mere fact of his thinking for himself ought to have formed, and perhaps would have formed, no impediment to his ministration in a Church which is in its very constitution the Church of private judgment. But his thought had landed him a long way beyond not only Church establishments, but even creeds of all kinds.

“Elsie, dear,” he said one day, as he was coiled up in the Dovecot nest, and I was sitting a good deal closer to him than I did on the first memorable occasion when we met there, “do you know I have been trying to fix my position in the graduated scale of religious beliefs, and I have come

to the conclusion that pure Theist is about the only term that will cover me."

"I ought to be very shocked, of course ; but to me, honesty is so very supremely at the head of the cardinal virtues, that I cannot condole with you as heartily as I wish I could."

"You fine old fellow, you !" Alec has the most remarkable habit of speaking to me as though I belonged to the male sex. "How different your words are from the goody twang they once told me I must expect from you. By the way, what legs you must have not to be able to get them in here. To me this place is what his tub must have been to Diogenes."

"Well, rest and be thankful, and don't allude disrespectfully to my legs. But tell me, my most erratic Alexander, what have the Unitarians been doing to you? I thought the last idea was to join their ministry."

"Very softly be it spoken, Elsie, but I have a notion that to do so would only be

to exchange shibboleths, not to rid oneself of them."

"You may find out the same thing about pure Theism next week."

"Very possibly, if not probably so. It wants more thinking over."

"My dear Alec, you have been two years thinking it over."

"And am rather farther from the conclusion than at first. True, O, king! live for ever! What then? It's a big subject, is it not?"

"It is."

"And yet how glibly we self-styled theologians talk about it, as though we had ultimated truth. Not an unfledged baccalere down below there, in Zoar, but will descant on the mysteries of the Christian Faith with the air of a Socrates and the impudence of a Cleon. Were it not better to put all from us with one decisive *coup*; to give up the great problem as insoluble until one gets to the fuller light beyond?"

"Why not do so, and resolve to live as a layman?"

"That I may not tell you; but some unrecognised influence, some power I cannot fathom or define, pulls me back from it, and prompts me to take Orders."

"Can you do so?"

"Scarcely, and save my conscience, except with an amount of reservation which to me now appears Jesuitical."

"Better anything than that."

"And yet——"

"And yet what?"

"May I speak very plainly, Elsie?"

"I don't think you usually beat about the bush much with me, or I with you, Alec. And yet——"

"And yet you will have to make a more hideous reservation still, when you go to the altar with your Calvinistic cousin."

"Suppose we put that on one side too, as a subject to be thought over, and too big to be settled summarily."

"By all means. *Carpe diem*. Only then,

it occurs to me that these are not the days of Methuselah, and that we cannot authenticate a case of centenarianism without treading on the corns of some amiable statistician whose name I have forgotten."

"Well."

"Well! How are we to go on with *carpe diem* under these circumstances? There will soon be no more days to seize, or we shall have got old, and they will not be worth the seizing."

"From which you infer——"

"That we should seize the day once and for all," he said, with an intensity I had never witnessed before. He took my hand, and went on, "Elsie, you said I did not beat about the bush with you. I will put my meaning so plainly that there can be no mistake about it. Let us bolt."

I was silent.

"Bolt beyond the reach of Calvinistic cousins, and where all the problems of life shall resolve themselves into the sweet one of love."

“Would that satisfy you, Alec?”

“To the heart’s core.”

“You think so now; but suppose the first thrill of possession over, could a man with your powers be content to bury himself here in Zoar?”

“Not here, Elsie; we would go to some far-off land, where life itself is luxury. There are such, where it is a privilege simply to breathe the soft air and look on the blue skies. Let us go and enjoy them together.”

“And what have become of your aspirations for hermit life? Alec, you know I am not speaking coldly, do you not?”

“I do.”

“But I think you are carried away by your feelings. I want you to fix on a career here, and carry it out. Then, if you still want me——”

“You will have married your Cousin Percy, and I shall only be able to compass you circuitously by means of the Divorce Court. Perhaps you will have a rich country

living and a lot of babies, and forget all the heretical colloquies of the nest on Dovecot Hill."

Again I could not answer him. I could only debate with myself whether I dared face the ordeal of a lifetime with Percy.

"Family considerations, I know, pull you strongly in a direction contrary to the one I am suggesting," he said; "but I have long debated the permissibility of suicide: and the life you project for yourself is moral suicide."

I fear it is.

I did not say this to Alec, recollect. I write it here among my private confessions, but I do not like to tell him I agree with him quite as much as is the case. These family considerations, which he makes light of, are not such light matters to me. In the first place, I have pledged my faith to Percy. Alec says I have broken it in spirit if not in letter by allowing myself to love another. That is true, I suppose. But then my father and mother have set their

hearts upon the match. It is, I know, the tacit condition upon which I inherit Aunt Phillis's money, and Aunt Rachel feels certain the Welsh estates will never be got at except with the assistance of my Uncle Edward. For myself I care nothing about these money matters. If I should live and die an old maid (which I must say does not appear very probable), I daresay my dear old father would leave enough to meet all my modest wants; but they all have these matters, and especially the much-talked-of marriage, at heart. The report that an earthquake had occurred in the night and swallowed up the cathedral would, I am sure, cause less consternation in High Street than the bare idea of my not marrying Percy. What an enormity these family arrangements are!

Strangely enough, I never think of Percy himself in the matter. It may be that I know he does not think of me. He looks upon me as a possibly not altogether disagreeable means of identifying the interests

of the two branches of the family. After the Mary Baker episode I cannot feel that Percy is quite inaccessible to the tender passion. Once I thought so, but I do not now. How dare I face life with one that can love and yet does not love me?

That would be scanned, as Hamlet says.

On the other hand, I regret to find that Alec is regarded by most of my family as a *mauvais sujet*. Why it should be so I can scarcely understand, for really the Zoar people can know very little of him, except that he is a clever young graduate who fails to do as well as he might. Idleness is about the worst fault anybody can attribute to him, and yet to hear my Cousin Percy speak of him you would think he was a criminal of the deepest dye. A hundred times of late I have been on the very point of saying all I know about the Mary Baker business and demanding an explanation; but, then, that would make a scene, and I begin to be as desirous of peace at any price as my dear mother herself.

So life goes on at Zoar. My association with Alec is so delightful that I forget all else in the anticipation of my next meeting with him. Why do I not fall in with his plans? Perhaps my presence would give him the impetus which is all he wants to make him enter on an honourable and useful career. He has his university degree and a modest income. Perhaps that might be the turning-point in his career.

Perhaps!

But, then, perhaps it might be just the reverse. After putting from me all my friends and relations I might find that, though Alec were as good and true as from my heart I believe him to be, yet I was only a drag upon him. A poor man can face the world alone, but with a wife and family he is so terribly weighted. Alec may not be so utterly unambitious as he seems; and it is so dreadful to think that when his ambition dawned, I might be the one obstacle to his carrying it out.

I will not think of it to-day. I will put

it from me ; as he shelves the big theological problem, so will I the domestic problem, though conscious that it is cowardly in each of us not to face our difficulties. But on this magnificent summer day I will adjourn to the Dovecot, where I know I shall find Alec dreaming and exulting in existence. I will dream and exult too, for at least one more day.





CHAPTER III.

MY EVANGELICAL AUNTS.

I AM living in such a perfect glamour in respect of Alec, that not only do the days come and go, and the seasons change imperceptibly, but I feel that I am neglecting my relatives. I do not mean that I am omitting to pay them due respect in the actual affairs of life, but I rather allude to this diary and the imaginary reader I am addressing, who will possibly never have a substantial existence at all. Fancy my ever publishing this rodomontade! I do not even date it; and not having been at all particular where I wrote in my diary, some of it has got utterly misplaced, and sometimes the diary has regularly run over as it were. I have got, besides the MS. volume,

quite a drawerful of poetry and prose, as Crabbe said of his youthful lucubrations.

Of course I cannot see Alec every day. Indeed, sometimes a good many days, or even a whole week, will intervene between our meetings; but even then I am occupying myself with all sorts of schemes for our next happy meeting, and if I put it off too long Alec dogs me on my way to or from cathedral, and bears me off in triumph; or else he will send letters by post, addressed in the very flimsiest imitation of a female hand. He tells me he does it by way of punishment because he feels I am forgetting him; and, to put it in his own language, he becomes more and more conscious every day that he could do without his victuals (he spells it 'vittles') better than without me.

"My dear Alec," I constantly have to say to him, "I wish you would twist your tails a little more."

"My tails."

"Yes; the tails of your letters when you

address billets to me. You will certainly get me into difficulties if you send such decidedly academical superscriptions. I often see Percy eyeing them on the slab—of course there's a sort of freemasonry about academical writers."

"Meet me regularly, and I shan't want to write at all," he will reply.

I am certain they do know more than they pretend about Alec; in short, it would be quite impossible in a little tittle-tattling place like Zoar for things to be otherwise. I suppose the fact is they think Percy and I are going to be married directly, and that will put an end, they argue, to all such "nonsense." To my intense delight, however, the projected arrangement with Percy appears every day to recede more and more into the background, and to leave Alec and myself more free than ever to practise our mutual nonsense. I cannot imagine why this should be the case, unless indeed, Mary Baker has anything to do with it; and it seems, of course, to an outsider, a remark-

able thing for a young girl to say in reference to her approaching marriage and intended husband, but if Percy would only prevent it from ever taking place, by running away with the pretty milliner, I should be happy. Then, perhaps, I could bring my family round to take a sensible view of my relations with Alec Lund.

But why, it may be reasonably enough asked, do I not make a firm stand—tell Percy and my family that I do not love him, and that I do love Alec? In nine cases out of ten where there are difficulties about love-matters, I do believe that they arise from want of a little preliminary firmness on the part of those who are principally concerned in them. I have already pointed out, however, how imperceptibly this affair of mine with Cousin Percy grew up, and it would have been difficult for me to say, at any particular epoch in its history, that I wished the past to be undone and the future to be different from what had been arranged. Now such an announcement

would be impossible without bringing about a catastrophe which it is dreadful to contemplate.

The result of all this is that I suppose no mortal ever realized so thoroughly as I do at this present time the fact that our life is twofold. I am as entirely two different people when I am with Alec on Dovecot Hill or in the Zoar woods, and when I am in the bosom of my family, as though I had changed every particle of my body and mind in the meantime, or as though two different spirits possessed alternately the same corporeal structure, and swayed it absolutely according to their own sweet will. The parenthetical periods I spend over the Ethics with the Dean, or in conversation with his wife, are a kind of neutral condition, when neither the one spirit nor the other has control, and when I can be almost my own natural self for a time, though I believe Mrs. Dean does know something about the state of things with Alec, for once, after getting out of me pretty well all I know of

his antecedents, she gave me a long steady look, and said—

“ You young flirt, you ; I believe you are making a fool of that already not very wise young man.”

It was an occasion when I felt, however silvery speech might have been, silence was golden. I said nothing.

Next to a *tête-à-tête* in the nest, my greatest luxury is to come upstairs and sit here over my books and papers, but I find it necessary sometimes to sacrifice myself on the altar of domestic duty, and go to dinner with my genteel Aunt Edward, or to take tea with my Evangelical Aunt Phillis, and great-aunt Rachel. They live together in the lodgings over Mrs. Baker's milliner's shop, not far from our house in the High Street. Poor Mrs. Baker is an exceedingly limp, washed-out kind of widow woman, and I sometimes wonder whether she knows anything about Percy and her daughter Mary, and whether she has told my aunts. For some reason or other, though they

are outwardly on very good terms with Percy, they always manage to make it understood that it is for family and not personal reasons they maintain kindly relations with him. I have been taking a quiet tea with my aunts this evening, and tried whether I could not penetrate a little beneath the surface of our mild family mysteries. I was conscious that the old ladies were talking at me about Alec too, so that the history of our fencing-bout comes to be not out of place in my story.

Let me focus my camera to photograph the old ladies.

Aunt Phillis, perhaps, would be aggrieved at being termed old, though her black hair is beginning to be streaked with grey, and I know she has given up all ideas of matrimony, which women defer doing until they feel they have passed the meridian. But she is a fair and comely spinster yet, and her dumpy white hands would be very good ones indeed if she did not bite her nails so dreadfully. She is another of the peace-at-

any-price people, and I really believe has taken to nail-nibbling, not out of ill-temper, which is sometimes said to be the cause of the practice, but simply out of fidget at the ever-recurring possibility of family dissension.

Aunt Rachel is the reverse in this respect. I have no conception how old she is, but she has always appeared to me a centenarian. She seemed quite as ancient when I first knew her as she does now. She is one of those old ladies who are said to "wear well," and, certainly, if strict attention to her own comforts, mental and bodily, does anything to prolong existence, she ought to reach the limits of old Parr himself. Aunt Rachel is very plain. I learnt in my earliest girlhood to draw caricature likenesses of her face, which I represented as principally composed of nose. I used to draw a large nasal organ, surmounted by spectacles, and backed with a mobcap. Encasing the old lady in her accustomed black lace shawl, and representing her read-

ing a newspaper, with the candle between it and herself; I managed to make a very recognisable portrait, much to the amusement of my uncles, who were not at all fond of Aunt Rachel.

I said Aunt Rachel was the reverse of Aunt Phillis in the matter of pacific policy. She felt aggrieved with my Uncle Edward on the score of some real or imagined wrong in the distribution of my grandfather's property, and was always throwing out dark hints as to what she could reveal on the topics of the Topaz estate and the Welsh property respectively. This fired my curiosity immensely, and I determined that I would follow Mr. Moddle's advice, and extract from these two old ladies whatever could be got by the process of diligent pumping.

"Well, Elsie," said my Aunt Rachel, who was niddle-noddling her mobcap over the fire, in the semi-comatose condition which seems so characteristic of very old people, "have you been to cathedral to-day?"

“Twice, aunt.”

“Twice! Gracious goodness, girl; you must spend most of your time there. I can’t think what you find so attractive in them popish canons and dean.” Aunt Rachel was born in days when Lindley Murray was not quite so much to the front as now, and she often offended the ears of Aunt Phillis, who had been educated at a genteel boarding-school.

“You forget the students, aunt,” said the younger of my two relatives. “There is mettle more attractive than deans or canons, is there not, Elsie?”

“I scarcely know a single student by sight now,” I replied.

“Since Mr. Lund left.”

“Yes, as you say, since Alec Lund left.” I would not be ashamed of him, and I would call him by his Christian name, if only to astonish the weak minds of the old ladies. “I fancy there is something in what people say about the intellectual standard of the men who take Orders becom-

ing gradually lower. They have never had a man who did anything at college since Mr. Lund's days."

"And his doings were rather in the way of promises than performances, I believe; were they not?" said Aunt Phillis, who could be as spiteful as any good Evangelical when she liked.

I made no reply; and she continued, pausing in her letter-writing to consult the marginal references of a pocket Bible, and going on when she had "fixed" her text.

"Besides, do you think it is intellectual excellence that is going to further the kingdom of heaven, Elsie?"

I really did not know, and only dreaded a sermon. Aunt Phillis was wont to be long winded when she got upon millennial topics.

"It is the foolishness of preaching that is to herald the closing-in of this dispensation," she said, and seemed to pause for a reply.

"Then all I can say is that from what I

hear at the cathedral on Sundays, and gather from the looks of the men who are at the theological college now, I should think the close of the dispensation was imminent."

"Why don't you come and hear Canon Wilcox at St. Hilda's?" said Aunt Rachel, who had no more idea of the difference between a Puseyite and a Calvinist than a child of seven had; but she took Aunt Phillis for granted as a sort of theological vade-mecum in these matters.

"I am not sure that Elsie would be much awakened by Canon Wilcox, aunt," replied Aunt Phillis, who always speaks of me as a hopeless heathen requiring awakening, converting, and all sorts of violent ecclesiastical processes. Her idea is that I always ought to be "hearing" somebody or other. That is her equivalent for going to church. The prayers are, in her regard, a sort of overture to the sermon.

"Canon Wilcox," she went on, launching forth, as I could see, into a sermonette, "is

not a decided man. If she could only go with Uncle Sam to St. John's, Bedford Row, she would get something to feed upon."

"Is tea nearly ready?" asked Aunt Rachel, not meaning to be irreverent, but managing, as she often did, to give a secular turn to Aunt Phillis's sacred talk.

As we lingered over the Sally Lunn's and watercresses, Aunt Phillis again turned the conversation into her favourite channel, by mentioning a lot of Evangelical and Non-conformist works, the *chefs d'œuvre* of Ryle, Cumming, and Spurgeon, and asking me if I had read them. She knew perfectly well I had not, but it brought the subject forward.

I mentioned that the works at that moment occupying my attention, were the last sensation novel of a popular authoress and the autobiography of John Stuart Mill. I never could resist the temptation of thus badgering Aunt Phillis when she would foist her peculiar views, men, or books upon me.

She only glared, and looked as much as to ask me whither I expected to go when I died. She had put that very question to me under similar circumstances a very few years before, when I pleaded guilty to the *Waverley Novels* and *Moore's Life of Byron*; now she only looked the query, grimly and significantly.

"Is that last a recommendation of Mr. Lund's?" she asked.

"It is."

"I should think he as nearly as possible represents the mental—or spiritual—condition of poor Mill, does he not?"

"As nearly as possible," I replied.

"Nothing millennial about either of 'em, I expect, is there, Phillis?" said Aunt Rachel, who had got back to the fireside again by this time and felt bound every now and then to prove that she was very wide awake indeed.

"Don't make puns, Aunt Rachel," I exclaimed.

"Fancy coupling Mill and the millenium," said Aunt Phillis.

“Or Mr. Lund, for the matter of that,” I added.

“Yes, or Mr. Lund either.”

“But, Aunt Phillis,” I said, “I don’t find Percy reads your favourite authors; and as I am to be his wife, you know, it would be better that I should not take up a style of literature which evidently has no attractions for him.”

“Ah!” moralized Aunt Phillis, in a monosyllabic interjection; and Aunt Rachel echoed it drowsily in her chimney corner.

“Ah!” There are volumes compressed in that interjection on the lips of an old lady.

“I wish I knew, aunt,” I said, putting down some ridiculous fancy work with which I was pretending to amuse myself, and looking at the old ladies like a browbeating barrister, “I wish you would tell me, and then I *should* know, why it is you always hum and ha when Percy is mentioned. Surely he is a good Evangelical; at all events he reads his *Record* like one, and preaches

what you call the 'pure gospel,' doesn't he?"

But the old ladies answered me never a word. Aunt Rachel shammed being quite asleep, which was almost unnecessary, as she was so very near it before; and Aunt Phillis went back to her reference Bible. This was always her resource in time of need, whether for the positive purpose of demolishing anybody with a text, or the negative one of pretending not to hear when somebody spoke.

I was not to be done by so simple a stratagem as this, however.

"Aunts," I repeated, striking the table petulantly with my elbows, so hard as pretty well to "bark" them, and frightening the old lady so that I made her knock down the fire-irons, whereat my Aunt Phillis scowled unmistakeably, "you have often told me it is rude not to answer when spoken to. Why don't you like Percy? As my future husband, I have a right to know what there is about him that makes you dislike him."

"Please, Elsie," answered Aunt Phillis, "don't say anything of the kind. It would make endless mischief with your Uncle Edward if he once got the preposterous idea that we didn't like Percy."

"Perhaps we like him too well," chimed in old Aunt Rachel.

"A man may not marry his grandfather's sister, I believe," was my reply, quoting, at a venture, the table of kindred and affinity.

"Don't joke about such very serious matters, Elsie," said my Aunt Phillis. "I don't know whether it is your association with the Deanery, or your persistent acquaintance with Mr. Mill—I mean Mr. Lund, that leads you to do this, but I observe you exempt no subject from your jokes, dear."

I always knew when Aunt Phillis called me "dear" she was getting angry. Texts and endearing epithets were the worst symptoms of her impending wrath; but I was not going to be scared from my purpose by the anger of two old ladies.

“ We will come to Mr. Lund by-and-by, if you wish,” I rejoined, “ let us settle Cousin Percy first. If you like him why don’t you go to his church ?”

“ There is a great deal of difference between liking a man and sitting under him,” said Aunt Rachel, with her usual unfortunate choice of dubious language.

“ Yes,” I answered, for the temptation was too strong for me ; “ I did not mean that you should honour Percy so far as to let him sit upon you, literally or metaphorically.”

“ We will change the subject, if you please, Elsie, altogether. We like your cousin as our relative, but esteem Mr. Wilcox as our pastor.”

“ Oh !” I replied ; and I fancy I contrived to throw as much meaning into my “ Oh !” as the old ladies into their “ Ah !”

“ I wonder why Percy isn’t in any hurry to get married, Aunt Phillis,” was my next irritating remark, when I had allowed a sufficient interval to elapse. “ That’s a

change of subject now, isn't it? and certainly one that you can't call irrelevant."

"But certainly one that should be settled by you and Percy between yourselves, Elsie. You do ask the most extraordinary questions."

"We haven't been in a hurry to get married," moralized Aunt Rachel.

Aunt Phillis blushed very deeply at hearing herself classed thus with her venerable relative.

"Why, Aunt Phillis, I declare you're blushing!" I said. "I hope you have given up all ideas of marriage, have you not?"

"Yes, Elsie," she answered, with a dash of sadness.

"I can just recollect the dreadful way in which you jilted that poor young Irvingite apostle you met at our house."

"Elsie, you are most extraordinary in your remarks to-night."

"Yes; it's tender ground, I know. All

I mean is, that you have made me your heiress, have you not? because——”

“What?”

“If Percy and I *should* marry——”

“If!” said Aunt Rachel.

“We should scarcely be able to live on his income, should we?”

“And so you anticipate my death in that cheerful way, do you?”

“No; that’s exactly what we don’t do. We are waiting very patiently. Percy, as I said, is in no hurry, and I am sure I am not.”

“And in the meantime you amuse yourself by flirting undisguisedly with Mr. Lund,” said Aunt Phillis, fairly roused at last. I knew I should do nothing until I had troubled the surface of the waters a little.

“Flirting, Aunt Phillis!”

“Yes, flirting. It is the talk of the town, isn’t it, aunt?”

But Aunt Rachel was, I was going to say, too wide awake, by which I mean too

apparently sound asleep to answer such a leading question as that.

“And now we are on these topics,” said Aunt Phillis, “I will just tell you what I have done. As to your Cousin Percy, whose name really need not be dragged into this matter at all, I say nothing. I look upon him as your destined husband, though I cannot understand his procrastination or your extraordinary conduct with Mr. Lund; but if you really wish to make your calculations on my decease, I will tell you—and show you if you like—that I have willed the little money I have to you, contingently on your not marrying Mr. Lund.”

“O, not on my marrying Percy.”

“With that, as I said, I have nothing to do.”

“As much as with Mr. Lund, surely.”

“No; I could not bear to think that the few hundreds I have accumulated went to promote the spread of infidelity.”

“But Percy is immaculate; isn't he?”

“I decline to say one word about your cousin, and nothing that you can do will induce me to alter my decision.”

“Least said, soonest mended, perhaps. But that is an unusual condition to annex to a legacy, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. Why so?”

“Because, supposing anything was to happen to you—that is the usual euphemism, I believe—and that I ran away with Mr. Lund.”

“Elsie!”

“If I did the proper thing under the circumstances and married him, I should, by the provisions of your will, be cut off without even the proverbial shilling; whereas if we omitted that ceremony, your money might still go to spread worse than infidelity, might it not?”

“You are, I hope, putting what is quite an impossible case.”

“Improbable. But Percy says that in legal arrangements no improbability, however great, must be accepted as an impossi-

bility. In fact, the law is omnipotent, and recognises no impossibilities."

"Be that as it may, such is the disposal I have made. Certainly the amount at stake is not large, and I may live to be as old as——"

"Aunt Rachel."

"I should never have thought of alluding to such a subject, of course, but you forced it upon me."

"Like a prudent prospective housewife, is it not?"

"Perhaps. There is the document if you wish to see it," and she threw me something written on the conventional blue paper, all I could see being that it was somebody's last will and testament, and that it was drawn up by Edward Llewellyn and Son. That was a little fiction to which my uncle lent himself at the time Percy was articled. So he had a finger in drawing up this will, had he?

"I wouldn't doubt your word for a moment," I replied, as I tossed the paper

back again. "Besides, what matters the will? you could cancel it to-morrow. Indeed, I have no doubt you will before you sleep to-night, if, as I think not at all unlikely, Mr. Lund comes and calls to take me home by-and-by."

This was the wildest romance on my part, but the poor old souls did not know whether to believe it or not. Aunt Phillis involuntarily looked round the modest apartment, and Aunt Rachel, waking up suddenly as was her wont, settled her cap to her own satisfaction, if to nobody else's.

"I know you too well, I am thankful to say," replied Aunt Phillis, with appropriate gravity, "to fear that you would ever perpetrate such an outrage as that, Elsie. Lax as may be the morals in the sphere of society where you unfortunately sometimes mix, and indiscreet—to say the least—as are your relations with this Mr. Lund, I am glad, at all events, that you have compromised no member of your family except yourself."

I had got as much as I wanted out of Aunt Phillis; so, after an interval of irrelevant, and, to me, uninteresting conversation, I returned to the charge, making Aunt Rachel the object of my attentions. She was so unmistakeably wide awake now that any assumption, even of drowsiness, would have been a transparent pretence on her part.

“What are you going to do for us, Auntie Rachel?” I asked, assuming a childish tone. “But I forgot; your money dies with you, does it not? They only allowed you an annuity out of my grandfather’s estate.”

“Ah! If my poor dear brother could only see me as I am; living here with just enough to keep body and soul together—— There! I hope he can’t, or I’m sure he couldn’t be happy.”

My Aunt Phillis knew what was coming, and sat on thorns.

“Lawyers do make ducks and drakes of property, don’t they, aunt, even when they’re one’s own flesh and blood?”

“ If the dead could speak, Elsie, you and I should be in very different positions from what we are.”

“ You mean that my father would be sole possessor of the Topaz Farm instead of its being divided between him, my uncles, and Aunt Phillis here, and with the power of devising it to me.”

“ Poor Susanna Dash couldn’t rest in her grave if she knew it was otherwise. If one person ever abominated another she abominated Edward Llewellyn. There was only one she hated worse, and that was your Uncle Samuel—‘ Snivelling Sam,’ she called him as a boy.”

“ And yet Mrs. Dash’s will left it simply to my grandfather for life, without binding his disposal of it, did it not? and his will left it divided as now.”

“ Both wills drawn up by Edward Llewellyn, then a youngster in practice, and each executed within a suspiciously short interval of the testator’s death, with Edward Llewellyn’s clerks as witnesses. It was

just the same with my wretched annuity. I only wonder Edward and Sam spared me that. I wonder they did not take all and leave me quite penniless."

My Aunt Phillis hereupon gave a sniff, to let us know she was crying, fearing we might else not be aware of that circumstance. She cried at the shortest notice, and on the smallest provocation.

"Don't cry, auntie, dear," I said, though I believe my words were as transparently hollow as her tears; "it is better these little family matters should be temperately discussed. Recollect I am a child no longer, and it is time I was taken round to all the cupboards and introduced to the family skeletons."

"Supposing all were as your Aunt Rachel insinuates, what would it matter? Directly you are married to Percy your interests are identical."

"But supposing I don't marry Percy? Supposing I adopt your suggestion, and go off with Alec—I mean Mr. Lund, omitting

the formality of marriage in deference to the provisions of your will?"

"Elsie!"

"Not only so; but supposing, as you say, things are as my Aunt Rachel not only insinuates but asserts, and as I daily and hourly more and more believe them to be, my father is being kept out of his rights. Dear good old weakminded man that he is, he might have been a landed gentleman here in Zoar, instead of a petty tradesman, in a different position from the rest of his family. Why, it would have saved my Uncle Edward's dignity better to have let the Topaz estates go as, in equity, at all events, if not in law, they ought to have gone. He might then have had a chance of mingling with the cathedral people, without the scandal of the shop in the High Street."

"He may do that still," said my Aunt Phillis, waxing wroth.

"I guess what you mean by that. I pretty well guess my Uncle Edward has bought your share of Topaz, and my Uncle

Sam's. As a lawyer, too, he has no doubt endless devices for getting my father's portion too, and perhaps ruining him in his business—literally shutting up his shop. He may think that because my father is good-natured to a fault, and has no son to assert his rights, that therefore he is at the mercy of himself and Uncle Sam; but, I tell you, that though I were twenty times married to Percy I would not see wrong done to my father without proclaiming it on the housetops."

"You are proclaiming it to the entire High Street now," replied Aunt Phillis, "by talking so unnecessarily loud."

"I have no right to be talking in High Street at all. I ought to be at Topaz Farm, a mile hence, with my father as present proprietor, and myself the future owner, instead of its being let to a wretched farmer, and the proceeds handed out in dribblets. I know wrong has been done, has it not, Aunt Rachel?"

But Aunt Rachel found the argument

running too high for her, and had prudently dropped off again.

My Uncle Edward is a splendid illustration of the proverb, that nothing succeeds like success. I believe that my Aunt Phillis is a thoroughly good woman, as far as cold duty goes. She would not do anybody an injury, not so much because she has any kindly feeling for people, as because wrongdoing would violate some far-down deduction from the Decalogue, or something in the margin of her annotated Bible. But she is blinded by success. Edward Llewellyn is a power in the family, and if she really has been party to any fraud as to the Topaz Farm, it is a marvellous instance of the power of success to reproduce itself.

But I had not yet done my pumping process, and I had to hit upon a strange device for waking up Aunt Rachel. I said, to the evident relief of Aunt Phillis—

“What have you got for supper, auntie? It smells very savoury.”

Aunt Phillis told me what it was, but I

heeded her not. All I wanted was to see whether the question roused Aunt Rachel. It succeeded to a miracle. The poor old soul had outlived almost all other enjoyments except the creature comforts of eating and drinking, and she still wielded a potent knife and fork. It was the old lady's boast that she had never tasted plain water, and could not even guess the flavour of it.

"And these Welsh estates, Aunt Rachel, that you sometimes speak of—where are they?"

"Mudwalla is the name, I'm sure, dear," answered the old lady. "Mudwalla, I'm sure, was the name, but the county I can't remember."

I ran through the Welsh counties, but she could not recollect. She had the most hazy reminiscences of her own girlhood prior to coming to Zoar; but my great-grandfather was, she said, only under a temporary cloud. My grandfather ought to have been, and my father ought now to be a great man in Mudwalla.

“But in the ordinary course of things these Welsh estates, if such there were, would have come to Percy, would they not? I made the mistake of being born a girl, you see. In fact we all made that mistake, did we not?”

“In the ordinary course of things they would; but it might have been, as was the case with Topaz, an extraordinary state of things. I shouldn’t a bit wonder if Percy had found out that you were the heiress, and that makes him so anxious to marry you.”

“Thank you for the compliment, aunt; but I don’t see his anxiety.”

“No; he don’t act as though he was very much in love, does he? But then love-making among cousins is very likely different from other cases.”

“Very likely. It may be as you say that if he did not think I was the heiress he might have married somebody else.”

“Leaving you free for Mr. Lund,” said Aunt Phillis, snappishly.

“Provided I could bring my conscience

to carry out the suggestions of that most immoral will of yours, Aunt Phillis."

That will was a trump card for me, and I played it boldly whenever an opportunity offered.

"Supposing I did run away with Mr. Lund, who do you think Percy's wife would be; or do you believe he would instantly become a devoted celibate?"

"Bless the girl, what questions she *do* ask!" ejaculated my Aunt Rachel from her coign of vantage.

"I think I could guess."

"Who, in the name of goodness?"

"Mary Baker."

My Aunt Rachel immediately stirred the fire with a vengeance that set at defiance all economic ideas as to coals, while Aunt Phillis jumped up and vigorously cleared the table for supper. I had raised the master-spirit of silence by the mention of that name, and knew I should get nothing more from my Evangelical aunts if I talked till midnight.

As I rose to help Aunt Phillis, and just as Aunt Rachel had rung the bell for supper, there was a double knock at the side door.

“Mr. Lund,” I exclaimed, “come to fetch me home.”

“Better be quiet,” said Aunt Phillis, listening at the door of the sitting-room. “It is Percy.”

“Oh, indeed!” I replied. “*He* doesn’t often come to fetch me home. Is he a frequent visitor here? And who—I am anxious to know—is letting him in? He is a long time making his appearance.”

Reply was rendered unnecessary by the entrance of Percy himself. He kissed the old ladies and myself as in duty bound, and I could not help wondering whether he had regaled himself with Mary on the stairs. Strangely enough I thought at the same time that I had a note in my pocket making an appointment with Alec Lund for a long walk the next day.

“I called in at Uncle William’s and found

Elsie was here, so I thought I would kill two birds with one stone——”

“ Three, you mean, Percy.”

“ I thought I might pay my respects to my aunts and at the same time fetch Elsie home. You have not supped, I see. Have you a knife and fork for me ?”

He could make himself very agreeable if he chose, and on that particular occasion he did choose. He talked Evangelicalism with the old ladies, and even retailed mild Zoar gossip to me. When at last he took me home, he sat and drank a glass of grog with my father after sending me upstairs to write my three-volume novel or Zoar guide-book, whichever it might happen to be. It was very late indeed when I heard him go, my father in his dear old cheery voice bidding him good-night at the side door, as though Percy were the dearest friend he had on earth.

Alec was vastly interested in the conversation which I repeated to him next day, as

nearly as possible in the same terms as I have written it here.

“Let us turn our steps towards Topaz Farm,” he said, “and see your future—as it ought to be your present—home. Your father, Elsie, has, in one significant word, been swindled by his goody and lawyer brothers. Promise me, darling, that you will be mine. Percy is only marrying you to patch up the evil-doing, and insure his own interests.”

“Thank you for the compliment, sir. Let me tell you, Percy made himself very agreeable last night.”

I do so like to tell Alec that somebody makes himself agreeable to me, especially Percy; perhaps, because, in his case, it is such a rare event. But dear Alec does look so deliciously jealous. He never says a word, but I know he would like to demolish the unfortunate individual who happens to merit my approval.

Say what people will, it is very nice to

make a great big fellow temporarily uncomfortable on your account, if only for the pleasure of immediately setting his mind at rest by saying something unusually sweet.

“The worst sign of all when your cousin exerts himself to be agreeable. Had he interviewed Mary Baker previously?”

“He was a very long time coming upstairs.”

“Then that accounts for his being so agreeable.”

I believe it was so. Just as I am generally “radiant” when I come from Dovecot Hill.

Topaz Farm is a dear old spot, about a mile from Zoar, and in the immediate neighbourhood of St. Simon Magus’ church. I suppose if we had been going to remain in Zoar after we were married, and Percy still retained the incumbency, we should have made Topaz the parsonage house. The residence itself was a farmhouse, and nothing more; but there could not be a finer

site for a country mansion, and there was just enough land around to give the proprietor a position in the place.

“That house shall, one day, be ours, Elsie,” said Alec, as we stood hand in hand in the lane looking over the hedge of one of the home-fields.

“If wishes were horses——” I suggested.

“Beggars would ride. Yes ; and I mean you to caracole over these paternal acres—if with me as your attendant cavalier, so much the better.”

“Your intentions, Mr. Lund, can scarcely be deemed disinterested, since you thus look upon me as a prospective heiress.”

“I’m not at all afraid of your thinking, that, Elsie. I am far too uncommercial a traveller along the highway of life for you to think my views interested. What I should like best of all would be to marry you in the teeth of Aunt Phillis’s will, and to let you find out—as then you would find, Elsie—that I had something in me. I could work for you.”

“ And turn commercial instead of uncommercial traveller.”

“ Yes.”

There again occurred an opportunity when I ought to have said, “ Go and do it. Make a position and come back for me if you want me. Then—if Percy has not forced me to stand to my word—I am yours.” I said nothing of the kind ; but we sauntered hand in hand among the Zoar fields, and, in a very little time, had forgotten all about disputed inheritances and old ladies’ wills in the supreme pleasure of being together.

We are told by certain seers, I believe by Swedenborg among the number, but am not sure, that when their inner vision is opened on the realities of the world beyond, there is no such thing as loneliness to be seen. It is as purely negative as darkness itself, and in that land of positive results neither one nor the other of these negations exists.

Those severed segments of being which here seem to be wearily seeking one another,

and which so seldom—so very seldom—meet, are there for ever reunited, and so it comes that the seer beholds each individual not as one but as two persons ; two, yet by some strange process of fusion, still only a single personality. I often—always—think, when I am walking with Alec, that we have forestalled this exceedingly eligible arrangement, and that whatever may happen to one or the other of us here—whether it be death or (worse still) marriage with any but the other of our two selves—all will be remedied there. If I could only sit down and spend a lifetime with him here, I could be perfectly happy. Why can it not be so ? What else ought to weigh against so strong and unmistakeable an assertion of nature ? This is what I think when I am with him, and the spell of his presence is upon me.

Then I go home and argue with myself, Is not this merely a refined form of selfishness ? Have I any right to set at nought all family arrangements and social usages ?

The consequence is, I am in the most divided state of mind. All I can do is to drift on from day to day, as I am doing, dubiously debating with myself whether I shall elect happiness and Alec, or self-sacrifice and—Percy.





CHAPTER IV.

MY PROTESTANT COUSIN.

THERE are, as I scarcely need observe, Protestants and Protestants. How very didactic that sentence looks; and how far more appropriate for the exordium of a sermon than for the commencement of an entry on a blank page of a young lady's diary. By the way, I daresay some people will be inclined to protest against so plebeian a party as a tradesman's daughter calling herself a young lady at all; but I am not going to be always a tradesman's daughter only.

My Cousin Percy's Protestantism—to revert to the oracular sentence with which I set out—is of the Aggressive order. (After considerable hesitation I decide upon writing Aggressive with a capital A.)

Etymologically, of course, Protestantism of all kinds is Aggressive. Why should we protest against other people's opinions or practices, except in so far as they violate good morals? Surely it is enough for us to see that our own do not err in this respect.

Percy is one of those men—far from exceptional ones I fancy—of whom it sounds almost profane to say that they would be far better if you could take their religion out of them. Possibly these lengthy analyses of my cousin may be tedious ; but I am naturally interested in taking stock of my future lord, and it really does appear to me something of a phenomenon that persons should contrive to turn a system which was so appropriately heralded by angel-carols as “Peace on earth,” into a source of bitterness and ill will. The sweet voices of the little boys at the cathedral, the deep tones of the organ, and the long vista of the Gothic arches ending in storied windows, however far they may be removed from what Percy

calls "primitive simplicity," surely convey much more of the genius of Christianity than spiteful tracts and frothy orations on controversial subjects. That is what I mean by Aggressive Protestantism: the faith and works of those people who, to use a homely phrase from an old ballad, "Won't let a body be." I want to let everybody be; and I expect everybody to do the same by me, but they won't.

On the other hand, the Protestantism of my Evangelical aunts is of the incomprehensible or hereditary kind, whose *raison d'être* seems only to lie in the fact that it is because it is. They were born to it, as they were to their family name. The old ladies imbibed Protestant principles, goodness knows how, in some remote palæozoic period, and those principles had become encrusted, fossilized, in their minds. It might just as well have been ultramontane, or, if the dear old creatures will forgive me for saying so, rationalistic ideas that they imbibed. In fact I am not sure that, under their special

training, infidelity itself would not almost have been more acceptable than Romanism. My own Protestantism, if I am to be called a Protestant at all, appears to me to be exactly that of my good old mother. I protest against protesting. I interfere with nobody's creed or practice, and, as I said, all I ask is to be let alone in mine.

There is a residuum of this negative kind of Protestant or Evangelical opinion, like that of my aunts, in Zoar, chiefly represented by old ladies, though they are of both sexes, for fogeydom has no genders. It is on this that Percy, ecclesiastically speaking, exists. I don't believe his Protestantism is a bit more sincere than his affection, and I know how much that is worth, or I think I do. The way the Church of St. Simon Magus was got up is very edifying. A college friend of Percy, who is now a leading Evangelical star in London, came to St. Hilda's one summer in place of a curate who was taking holiday, and by his highly flavoured Calvinistic preaching stirred up the residuum I

speak of into something like activity. When this luminary waned, the residuum felt its darkness; and as the orb was unattached to any ecclesiastical solar system at that time, it was suggested that he might gyrate round the cathedral of Zoar as a centre; in other words, that he might come and get up a church in the little city. That phrase "getting up" was eminently suggestive. Where the funds originally came from I cannot say, though I suspect. I only know that Percy was exceedingly active in the matter; but of course my Uncle Edward could not personally advance the interests of a system that ran counter to the tone of the dignitaries in Zoar. I know, moreover, that the most impecunious people in Zoar subscribed really large sums to St. Simon Magus, and simultaneously my Uncle Edward complained that his account at the bank was considerably overdrawn. He attributed it to the large sums he advanced to the Bishop. I suspected St. Simon Magus' and the Protestant men of

straw who subscribed to its erection and endowment. I have a further idea that my father "accommodated" his brother Edward at that time, and crippled himself not a little in his business to do so. Anyhow the star-curate was appointed; the trustees of the subscription fund managing (through my Uncle Edward again, I suspect), to secure three presentations. The star dropped out of the Zoar system to gravitate towards that of the metropolis. He "resigned in consequence of preferment in London," and Percy was at once instituted. He only managed to be in the nick of time by scrambling, as I have said; but he *was* in the nick of time nevertheless.

Now it appears to me that, with the very comfortable income Percy gets from St. Simon's, added to the handsome allowance with which Uncle Edward supplements any possible deficiencies, he ought to be extremely comfortable, and to let me drop quite out of his calculations. He has a suite of rooms at home, and will be a rich

man when his father dies ; but he wants to live *en grand seigneur* at Topaz, and be simultaneously Protestant popeling of St. Simon Magus ! He has the most colossal ideas for an Elizabethan mansion on the site of the present modest farm ; and one day lately, when he had been roasting me about going to cathedral, and then began to picture the grandeur in which we could live at Topaz, if we had it all to ourselves, I said—

“That’s hardly ‘primitive simplicity,’ Percy, is it?”

“My expression referred to worship, Miss.” He called me “Miss” very often, as though I were a school girl.

“I thought life was worship,” I replied.

It is very odd how easily we wriggle out of the conclusions in which our own premises land us as a logical necessity.

I have now to chronicle what, if left to my own feminine resources, I should of course term a *contretemps*. Alec says it is much better rendered by the plain Saxon “bust-up.” It scarcely amounts to that at present ; but it

has within it the elements of a possible earthquake.

Alec and I had been studying the Zoar lanes through a long summer afternoon, watching the effect of the broad belts of shadow cast by the trees across the brilliant emerald of the grassy sideways, and the white dust of the midroad. Every now and again we would stop and lean pensively over a gate, or sit on a stile, and, I remember, we debated, as actively as the warm weather would allow, whether the cows who were champing the cud under the umbrageous elms were not better off than human beings. Alec was decidedly of the opinion that they were. More for the sake of opposing him, than because I felt strongly anti-bovine, I held that humanity had the advantage.

"These 'huge but imperfect organisms,' as the 'Autocrat of the Breakfast Table' calls them, are free," he argued; "if from the rare joys, certainly from most of the inevitable sorrows, of human kind. See how

placid they look, while we are fuming about eccentric matrimonial arrangements, Topaz estates, Evangelical aunts, and Protestant cousins. They neither reflect nor anticipate, and go to the slaughter-house as complacently as to the dairy."

"All a perfectly gratuitous assumption," I answered; "but, even supposing it true, inconclusive. Go a step lower, and envy the grass itself, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven."

"I go lower still, and ambition what seems to us the nonentity, as far as organic life is concerned, of the mineral world. I never could dread annihilation."

"Complimentary to me."

"I don't see that it is the reverse. This moment I have you, and am happy; the next moment your Cousin Percy may come upon the scene——"

Talk of the ——! The next moment he did come upon the scene.

It is said that is a long lane which has no turning. The Zoar lanes were prodi-

giously long, with very few turnings sometimes, and this particular one was of the lengthiest and straightest. Right at the other end, where it emerged upon the high road, my Cousin Percy hove in sight, making believe to be taking a constitutional, I suppose—a thing, by the way, he never did—for we were two good miles out of Zoar proper. We were standing at a stile, at the further end of the lane, but full against a background of greenery, which might or might not render us visible to a spectator at the far end. We might possibly have escaped, but we agreed we would not. It would look mean if we were caught. Alec did not want to avoid a meeting with Percy ; why should I ? We would have it.

Percy was walking very slowly, and of course did not pretend to see us until he came quite close. I feel sure he wanted us to run away from him, and thought we should do so. We decided, as I say, to remain, and had ample time to rehearse our parts. No doubt he went over his too.

Now, under such circumstances, the parties at rest—that was in the present case Alec and myself—have great advantages over the one in motion—namely, Percy.

The defensive are immensely easier than the offensive tactics in such a case. He looked infinitely awkward as he neared us. Alec adopted a practice he often does with me when I meet him—namely, looking at my boots. It makes one feel as though there must be something wrong about them; and really Percy shambled up to us as ungracefully as a recruit doing his goose-step.

I looked at his face, and saw he was angry. That gave me an advantage instantly. I would be cool as a cucumber, whatever he might say or do. I was quite sure of Alec—he is a philosopher.

Without the slightest salutation to me or recognition of Alec, Percy faced me, and said—

“Come home, Elsie.”

“Exactly what we were thinking of doing. By the way, I can’t tell from your manner

whether you know Mr. Lund or not. Let me introduce you to one another"—which I did—"and we can all go home together."

"I neither have, nor seek, Mr. Lund's acquaintance, and decline the honour thrust upon me. You will come home with me alone, Elsie."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Miss Llewellyn came out with me, and I shall certainly escort her home, unless she herself tells me it will be disagreeable to her."

"Escort her home! Will you dare to take her down the High Street, dare to take her even to her father's door—I do not speak of risking being kicked out by crossing the threshold?"

Alec smiled sardonically, and I drew the figure of the fifth proposition of the first book of Euclid with the point of my parasol in the dust.

Percy only paused for breath, and then ran on—

"No; you will sneak away from her on

the outskirts of the town, just as you wait for her there, like a cowardly thief, as you are."

"You are doubly protected, Mr. Llewellyn, by your cloth and by the presence of a lady. Pray go on, I would not interrupt you for worlds."

The very fact of being told to go on shut Percy up at once. There was an awkward pause. If we had stopped till Doomsday neither Alec nor I would have said anything—it was not our rôle. We elected to be dumb personages, and Percy was fairly obliged to speak.

It was simply the accident of the aggressive attitude he had assumed.

"Once more I say, follow me home, Elsie. I am going."

"Don't go with the most distant idea that I shall follow you, because I shan't. I came out with Mr. Lund, and with Mr. Lund I will return; if you like to join us, well and good; if not, go solus."

"Are you aware that this lady is my

future wife, Mr. Lund?" was the next demand of my irate cousin.

"I am aware that Miss Llewellyn has that brilliant prospect in view, unless such an exhibition as this makes her change her mind."

"Allude to my private affairs in that way, and I'll——"

I really did not think Percy had it in him, but he advanced towards Alec in quite a menacing attitude, and his thick oak stick quivered in his right hand.

"No you will not," replied Alec, without lifting his arm; but just standing a trifle more erect than usual, filling out his Herculean chest and fixing his eyes on Percy.

"You forget your position as a man of peace. You also forget it was you, not I, who alluded to your engagement with Miss Llewellyn."

"Do you suppose for one moment that I am going to walk home by myself, and leave you to escort my—my——" He did

not know exactly what to say, so compromised it by saying, "my cousin?"

"I suppose nothing; I am acting under orders. If Miss Llewellyn tells me to go, I am over that stile and off in a moment. Unless she does so I remain."

"Remain!" I said.

"And you defy me?"

"I do."

"Then we *will* go home together. I can spoil your tête-à-tête, if I can't make that fellow forbear to obtrude his company where it is not wanted. He dares not, as I said, follow us to your father's door."

"I will not follow, but accompany Miss Llewellyn until she herself dismisses me wherever that may be," said Alec, with the most seraphic smile; and off we all set together.

It was a sweet and pleasant walk, as may be imagined. Alec and I made the most frantic endeavours to be natural, and, of course, succeeded in being as artificial as possible. We descanted on the various

beauties of the Zoar scenery just as though we had never seen it before, and in language really very like that of the guide-book I was credited by Cousin Percy with being engaged upon.

As for him, he walked silent and sullen, with us but not of us: and I could not help thinking, from the expression of his face, that he was making up hard speeches to assail me with when he got me alone or with a majority on his side. For the moment he was in the minority.

At every gate through which we had to pass, and there were a good many between that Lane of Destiny and Zoar, Alec stood politely on one side first to let me pass in deference to my sex, and then Percy—I suppose in consideration of his cloth. Poor Percy! I really felt for him. He had put himself in a false position, and the way he shambled along at our side, or bundled himself through the gates while Alec waited, was so infinitely ridiculous that I could not help pitying him in spite of myself, and

picturing what would be the state of his feelings when we came to the market-place.

Before we emerged upon that centre of still life, and just as we were passing under the archway that led thereto from the Bishop's palace, he paused as if to give Alec an opportunity of leaving us should he be magnanimous enough to do so; but he was inexorable as Fate herself, and not by a word or look did I encourage him to relent. Thus we sped, a remarkable trio, across the market-place and down the High Street, to the marvel of the inhabitants, who had never so seen it in Zoar.

When we arrived at the door of my home I held out my hand to Alec by way of giving him his congé, and he bade me good day in the stiffest and most hypocritical fashion. If the suppression of the truth amount to an assertion of falsehood, Alec then and there burdened his conscience considerably; for, under ordinary circumstances, we should scarcely have parted without a much warmer salutation, and certainly not

without arranging plans for another speedy meeting; but then we did not generally part in the High Street. He raised his hat to Percy in the most approved style, but my cousin took no notice beyond scowling a little more than before.

When we got into the low oaken parlour we found quite a family party assembled. There was an early tea-drinking, and my Evangelical aunts were the guests. My Uncle Edward was looking on and enjoying the gossip. Indeed, he seemed always to run down to High Street when the atmosphere of his more genteel home became too rarefied for his really plebeian tastes, or his small wife was more deaf than usual. She varies a good deal with the weather, and her tympanum pretty well serves my uncle as a barometer.

“Here come the pair of turtle-doves home to the dovecot after an afternoon’s cooing,” said my uncle, who went in for being witty, and liked to have his mild joke at other people’s expense. I quite expected Percy

would fire up at once, and tell them how one of the doves had chosen the wrong mate ; but no, he really looked and behaved like the bird of peace my uncle made him out to be. He said nothing, indeed, but tried to assume a little graceful confusion quite like an ordinary lover under the circumstances.

What was the meaning of this, I wonder ? Was he ashamed to own he had a rival ; or did the presence of my aunts make him taciturn ? It was wonderful the spell those two old ladies exercised on this not very sensitive parson. At all events, I could see he was going to let the matter drop for the time, waiting, no doubt, until he could catch me alone ; so, of course, the spirit of contrariety tempted me to tease him by alluding to the subject he would fain have tabooed.

“ The cooing has not been very dovelike,” I said ; “ and I have had no voice in it ; in fact there has been a good deal more of the eagle than the dove about it.”

“ Oh, I see, a lovers’ quarrel,” returned

my uncle. "Well, 'amantium iræ,'—you know the rest, don't you?"

"I do; but I don't think that musty old proverb will hold good in the present case."

"Oh yes, it will," said my Aunt Phillis, who had not the most distant idea what it meant, Latin not being in her day included even among the extras of a young lady's education. "Kiss and be friends."

"Not in public, I should hope," ejaculated Aunt Rachel.

"Not in public or private," I pouted, and threw my bonnet, as was my untidy habit, on a chair. I felt hot and flushed.

"Have a cup of tea, dear," said my good old mother. This was her panacea for every ill—a good cup of tea; and she had already supplied Percy with his. By this time he looked positively beaming, and had the impudence to say, "Come and sit by me, Elsie, in case a change for the better should come o'er the spirit of your dream."

I had no idea that man could dissemble

so well. I would not appear as annoyed as I really was; so I flopped myself down in the chair he offered me, as much as to say, "I can disguise my feelings too, if I like." Whether it was the tea, or what, I cannot say, but in ten minutes' time no one could have guessed that the surface of our love-making had even been ruffled.

I knew this was too millennial to last, however, and suspected Percy was only biding his time. He found it very difficult to get an interview during the next few days; but at length he adopted Alec's plan, and caught me coming out of the cathedral after the afternoon service. I could see Alec himself on the look-out at his window on the other side of the green; and if I had been very anxious to avoid the discussion I could easily have telegraphed to him or refused to leave the spot; but, like the visit to the dentist, I felt the operation must be performed sooner or later, so I might as well get it over.

"Come for a walk, Elsie," he said, in a

tone cleverly regulated, so as to be between a request and a command.

"I am at your orders, of course," I replied, in the same style. "Is it to be cooing, or fighting?"

"That depends upon you."

"It takes two to make a quarrel," I rejoined.

"It took three last time. You could not possibly have thought me unreasonable in my objection."

"I daresay I could if I tried," I said, determined to be aggravating.

"Well, don't try. Walk with me to East Zoar, or as far as Topaz if you are not tired."

"Very well. Let us go and inspect our future Paradise."

"Do I understand that you are anxious to cancel our engagement?"

"I did not say so, or throw out the remotest hint to that effect."

"But you certainly acted the other day as though you meant it. Did you not?"

“Perhaps so.”

I succeeded at last. My dogged manner made him angry. I knew we should get on more quickly then.

“Look you here,” he continued. “I demand an explanation; I have a right to it in virtue of our engagement.”

“Do leave alone these business terms,” I said.

“But I won’t leave alone these business terms. It’s a matter of business, as well as of—of——”

“Cooing.”

“As well as of affection,” he concluded, with an effort. “Just say whether you will consent to give up that blackguard Lund’s acquaintance or our engagement. I will not drop the business term, as you call it.”

“And I will not accept your alternative,” I answered. “Why should I? Renounce Mr. Lund’s acquaintance I will not. I am not a child that I should be told with whom I may or may not associate. If you like to

make my refusal the ground for breaking off our engagement, do it. Go and tell my father the reason. You may choose to be jealous of the Dean next, and insist on my dropping him."

"Very possibly."

"Then I should again refuse. I repeat I am not a child."

"And I am not a fool, though you evidently think me one. Knowing a man is very different from taking two-mile walks with him three times a week, and lingering by rustic stiles and five-barred gates with him."

"I'm not the only one that lingers at rustic stiles," I replied, "and you never saw him kiss me as I saw you kiss Mary Baker at the stile by the Fishponds."

Percy collapsed.

"I don't know what cock-and-bull story you allude to," he was going on.

"I allude to no story at all, but to what I saw with my own eyes," and I gave him the exact day, hour, and spot where it

occurred. He found it convenient to ignore the circumstance, and proceeded—

“I am now in a position to marry, and I demand the fulfilment of our engagement.”

“You will have your bond?”

“I will, or let the bond be publicly cancelled.”

“Then it is better we spoke plainly, is it not?”

“Much better. Speak out.”

“You are perfectly aware that I do not love you, are you not?”

“Perfectly.”

“You more than suspect that I love somebody else?”

“I know it.”

“And yet you are willing, for family and financial reasons, to make me your wife, notwithstanding this twofold knowledge?”

“For family and financial reasons, yes. Do you think one marriage contract out of a thousand is made under more romantic auspices?”

"Heaven help the nine hundred and ninety-nine if they are not."

"They certainly are not."

"And you," I continued, losing my temper almost as much as he had done before, and for something of the same reason, "you, too, love some one else. I know you do; I don't ask the question."

"Do be content to leave that ridiculous monosyllable to boarding-school misses. I thought you were strong-minded, Elsie."

"I don't know why."

"Of course I love you as a sensible man loves a sensible woman, and that is a kind of feeling which grows with marriage. The romantic passion of a moustached loafer never outlives the honeymoon."

"And the same remark would apply to the sensible man's penchant for a pretty milliner, I suppose?"

"A sensible woman would scarcely be jealous of a doll-faced flirt, I should think," rejoined Percy. "But I have sought this interview for a special purpose."

“To threaten matrimony. Is it not so?”

“If you like to put it so, yes. I require you to fulfil your engagement with me at once.”

“At once? Here, and now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I shall speak to Uncle William to-night, and beg him to make all arrangements as soon as possible. Whether I shall remain in Zoar, or exchange St. Simon’s, I do not know.”

“But on immediate marriage you are resolved?”

“I am.”

“And you anticipate your husband’s authority by commanding me to discontinue altogether my acquaintance with every one who does not exactly meet your approval.”

“With Mr. Lund only.”

“With Alec—Mr. Lund, I mean—to-day; with the Dean or Mr. Moddle to-morrow, I should not wonder.”

“Very well, if you choose to think so. What is your reply?”

“Such blind unreasoning obedience to

your commands I should refuse, even though I were actually your wife. Reasonable concession to your wishes I should be of course prepared to make."

"Supposing you were my wife?"

"Yes."

"But under present circumstances—I mean because we are only engaged and not actually married—you refuse even that?"

"No, I do not say so ; but the question in my mind is whether what might be purely reasonable then is not unreasonable now."

"And the question I put is one much more easily answered : Are you prepared at once, without any further delay, to fulfil your promise by marrying me?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know ! Who, in the name of wonder, should know, if you don't?"

"Well, nobody I suppose. But I want time to consider my reply. Give me twenty-four hours."

"To enable you to see Lund, and ascer-

tain whether he means matrimony or not?"

"Don't be coarse," I answered; "go to St. Simon Magus', for I see the sexton at the door, who evidently wants to speak to you. I can go home by myself. We have had enough cooing for one while."

"In twenty-four hours from this time, I expect a definite answer, then."

"Twenty-four hours after date—let us be commercial, by all means—you shall have an answer as plain and precise as your question."

And so we parted.

I wonder whether I was a very dreadful hypocrite when I told Percy not to be coarse because he suggested that I wanted to ascertain the real state of Alec's feelings. It was literally what I did want. The wishes of my family are very influential with me, and I should be glad if my marriage could prevent family feuds, and cement interests which are else likely to be divided, but I cannot go to God's altar with a deli-

berate lie on my lips, and I am sure my nearest and dearest relative would be the last to wish me to. The legal portion of my kindred may, and would, but not my dear good and too indulgent parents; not even, I believe, my Evangelical aunts if the matter were fairly represented to them. Yes; I would see Alec—and I will see somebody else too—before I give my final answer.

I cannot think how people can be such sceptics as to doubt an occult and unconscious rapport between persons circumstanced like Alec and myself. When I saw him at the window of his lodgings, on the cathedral green, he was reading his book, smoking his constant cigar, and looking as permanent as the pyramids. I knew I could have summoned him to my side—our side—by a look so secret that even Percy should not have detected it, though I studiously refrained, for the reason I gave, from making any such sign. But the thought certainly did pass through my

mind, "I should wish Alec to dodge us like a detective, to hang upon our footsteps, and meet me directly I left Percy," and, do you know? that was exactly what Alec did. There was a back street running parallel with the main thoroughfare of East Zoar, and joining Topaz Lane somewhat higher up. Instinct told me that Alec would linger there, and, as soon as Percy was closeted with his sexton at St. Simon Magus', I turned up a little court, and, on reaching the back street, found myself face to face with Alec. I have no conception how I did it, but I did convey all that long message to him, and he followed it out to the letter.

"I have only a quarter of an hour to give you, Alec," I said, "and lots to say in it. Let us walk as far away as we can from East Zoar, and you just listen to what I have to tell you."

Then I told him every word that had passed between Percy and me.

"And you ask me what your answer shall be?" he said.

"I do."

"Will you promise to abide by what I say?"

"I would rather you did not exact a promise from me, but just advise me unconditionally."

"I will; and I will be as business-like as Cousin Percy himself, when I contrast myself with him, and our relations with those existing between you and your cousin."

"That is right."

"In the first place, and as I may without being romantic or unbusiness-like say, there is this supreme difference: I love you, and your intended husband does not. You believe this?"

"Shall I believe it? Or is it possible, Alec, that you are deceiving, not me, but yourself? Are you mistaking for real love what *may* only be a passing fancy? Everything for me depends on this."

"I know it does; and that is why I put it first, and said it was supreme over all else. Your cousin would—naturally enough

perhaps—persuade you that I do not, to use his own graphic phraseology, ‘mean matrimony.’ Very likely he thinks he is saying what is true. It is not true, Elsie. Do you believe me still?”

“If you say it now, I must believe it. This is far too serious for trifling.”

“And you wish to believe it, do you not?”

“Yes.”

“Then never let one shadow of doubt cross your mind again. I have doubted myself sometimes. I have taken myself to task as though I were somebody else, and asked myself whether I could take the responsibility of stealing your heart away from your cousin; away perhaps from all your family; whether I had a heart to offer you worth all the great sacrifice you would make if you accepted my love.”

“And you have stood the test of such self-examination?”

“Thoroughly. I knew this must come. I have, as you are aware, rather coveted

such a crisis than otherwise. I am doubly glad now that it enables me to assure you, darling Elsie, that it is no passing admiration of your beauty or your talents——”

“Alec!” I dreaded lest he should call me clever.

“Yes ; I will say it, you are beautiful, and you are talented ; tenfold more than even the good opinion of your neighbours gives you credit for being. But it is not that. For the first time in my life I feel the master passion, and I deliberately ask you—what I could not do if I had the least doubt about myself—to relinquish your cousin, and take me in his stead.”

“To give up for you every friend I have on earth, Alec ? for it may come to that, so blindly are they attached to this family arrangement.”

“Even so, I ask it ; because I know you love me, and that, therefore, I can more than replace them all. Besides, I will make myself a name. I know I can do it, do you not think so ?”

“ I am sure of it.”

“ Even as I am, they could not say you had married quite a penniless fellow, though I know I ought to have done more and dreamed less of late.”

“ That has been my fault.”

“ Partly so, perhaps, but rather let us say nobody’s fault, only our destiny. Let us accept it.”

“ No philosophy would be required on my part to make me do that.”

“ In another point, too, I elect to differ from your Cousin Percy. I do not wish you to give your answer now. I would rather you did not. Go home and reflect well on this. Consult those in whom you feel confidence. See your cousin to-morrow, as arranged ; give him your final answer, and then come here and let me know mine. Will you do this ?”

“ I will, Alec.”

We were by this time in some of the fields which skirted the little city, and really there was no reason why I should not there

and then speak plainly to Alec, for I knew there could be but one answer. For the first time, in our strange association, I felt that ineffable peace which I was sure could spring from but one source. I had, I could scarcely say doubted, but still held it open to question, what Alec's course of action would be if the decision were thus suddenly thrust upon him. There was no doubt or question now. I knew he loved me, and I felt that perfect peace which assured me I should be wicked as well as weak if I entrusted my heart to another.

I am posting up this diary in my own quiet room, on the eve of what is to be, for me such an important epoch in existence. I have not said one word to my father or mother, because I want whatever I do to be my own act and deed alone. Alec is now only too anxious to see my father on the subject; and, of course, if I refuse Percy's request, that will be the next course to adopt, so I have to think the matter out.

All the house is quiet, and I open my

window noiselessly to gaze out upon the tranquil moonlight. That strange sensation of peace which I felt to-day with Alec in the fields, comes over me again. I am looking down into the garden, where the shrubs are gleaming white in the silver sheen, and casting long black shadows across the dewy grass ; and the grand old chestnut trees at the back are just moving their broad leaves in the light summer breeze. They put me in mind of Alec's hands stretched out to greet me, and I find myself extending my arms in response. Yes, Alec ; I, like you, am experiencing the master passion. Were I to go to the altar with Percy, feeling as I do for you, I should violate not only the laws of God and man, but the dictates of my own heart. I must love you still, and how could I hypocritically offer another the affection which must be yours alone ?

I retire every now and then from the window, and write a paragraph, returning to gaze once more at the moonlit garden. It

seems to me that thus it must have been in Paradise when there were no sins and sorrows, no carking cares, no money, no property—no Evangelical aunts or Protestant cousins.

I dread to think what will be the effect on them all of the announcement which I must make. Must I? or will something occur to prevent it? Will my courage fail at last? Shall I find on the morrow that Alec has played me false? The other alternative seems too good to be true. It seems impossible that to-morrow night—when that marvellous period of twenty-four hours shall have sped—I may be sitting at this same casement, looking down on the moonlit garden as now, but with my heart given openly—as it is even now in secret given—to Alec.

I do not know whether it really amounts to a presentiment, or whether it is only one of those vague fears that haunt us in the very midst of our joys, but I cannot bring myself to believe that all this great hap-

pineness may be in store for me, and so soon ; that all, in fact, depends upon the utterance of one or two words by my own lips ; that it might have been mine now had I not chosen to delay. Shall I be cheated out of it still for my silly indecision ?

The moon went down, and another radiance lit up the eastern sky before I retired finally to rest. I knew it was the light of the coming sun, and felt that, while the former light was like the romance of my love-dream, the latter was more illustrative of the stern realities which would come along with it. That sun would soon wake up our western world to labour and activity ; and along with my fairy dreams I am aware there will come the day's difficulties—it may be the day's sorrows and sufferings. Yet, beautiful as that silver moonlight is, the sun is, after all, the real source of life ; and though I have no doubt my late watching will make my complexion a little more paste-like than usual to-morrow, I do not regret this, because I feel the rising sun has given

me courage, while the waning moon only encouraged my romantic dreams.

If I look very sallow indeed, perhaps that will reconcile Percy to his loss. But will it scare off Alec, too, I wonder ?





CHAPTER V.

MR. MODDLE.

WHEN I got up this morning the first thing I did was to repeat the process I described at the opening of the story (for really it seems to be developing into one), that is, I looked at myself in the glass. It is not enough to say I was pale. I was *green*. Then I felt the mistake I had made in sitting up amid the moonlight and until the sunrise. I had a trying day before me; and I began by feeling tired. This was worse than anything that could happen to my complexion. However, it is all over now, and I sit down to recapitulate the events of this, which has been so far the most eventful day in my not very long or varied life.

I suppose the history of the confessional

proves the necessity of some kind of direction for the feminine mind. I do not by that expression mean to speak of women only ; for some men have minds quite as feminine as we have. Some can bear to stand alone : others must lean and twine themselves about something else for support. All women do not feel this I know, but the majority of the sex do ; and therefore I call it the feminine condition of mind. I was very conscious of this feeling when I got up to-day. I felt the need of some unprejudiced and dispassionate person before whom I could lay all the facts of the case, and to whom, furthermore, I could add with sincerity so perfect as to be disagreeable—"I do not pledge myself to take your advice ; very probably I shall not : but still give it to me frankly and without reserve."

Mr. Moddle's name at once occurred to me.

I am always conscious, when I rise in the morning, of considerable clearness in my ideas, which I frequently lack when I retire

to rest at night. It is my constant custom to put quietly aside any question, whether intellectual or domestic, that troubles me, and to "sleep upon it." Very often the solution comes the first thing in the morning, and seems to arise from some source as distinctly outside my own consciousness as though an audible voice suggested it. That was the case this morning. My own ideas were certainly not in a lucid condition; but at all events I was receptive. Perhaps I have a familiar, as though I were really what my fellow-citizens believe me—a female Socrates. Certainly something or somebody suggested almost in articulate words this morning the name of Mr. Moddle.

"Consult Mr. Moddle."

I recollect one of the earliest promises I made in this rambling story, was that I would describe Mr. Moddle. I am rather glad I have deferred doing so up to this point, because I should perhaps have been inclined to tone down the portrait a bit; but I have no compunction now. I will be

faithful and unflattering as a photograph. Still, while I extenuate nothing, I will set down nought in malice. How often Shakspeare's words say what we want better than our own phraseology. I suppose that is one of the surest tests of the true poet. Many people feel this with the psalms, I know. Perhaps, at present, mine is rather a secular mind, but I am more conscious of it in reference to Shakspeare, and, in a smaller degree, a few other poets. They seem to have gone over all my experiences for me beforehand, and to give me excellent advice in a compendious epigrammatic form.

Personally, as far as his outward man is concerned, Mr. Moddle is very much the reverse of prepossessing. He is short, stoutish and bull-necked; but he has a redeeming point in his hands, which are almost effeminately small, and seem to bespeak blue blood in his veins. His immediate origin was, I have heard, extremely humble, and I know he has worked his way up to the position he now holds by

sheer energy and dogged perseverance. He is certainly a first-rate scholar, and, I believe, had some academical training at a Scotch university; but he took no degree, and never refers to his college career. He has done the real work of education for himself, just as, I am thankful even now to confess, he did it for me or rather put me in the way of doing it for myself afterwards. He came to Zoar as a Baptist minister, and soon afterwards married a pretty waxen-faced woman who was unsuited to him in every respect except one. She had a little money, and he nothing but his modest stipend. The income she brought him covered the expenses of his moderate household, and enabled him to indulge his only extravagance, which ran in the direction of books. They never had any family, but lived and loathed together in one of the old-fashioned houses under the shadow of the great cathedral, until one day she ran away with a former admirer and left Mr. Moddle alone in his glory. Satisfactory arrangements were

made as to money matters, and he was well content to pass the remainder of his days as a widower bewitched. Such, however, was not his destiny. Mrs. Moddle died very soon after her escapade, and her departure, it was whispered, did not lacerate the hearts of either of her lords. They were even on speaking terms afterwards when they met; and I do not think it was a common sorrow which linked them each to the other. They agreed that poor Mrs. M.'s departure was "a happy release." They did not say for whom; perhaps they meant for all three!

When the Irvingite movement was new, and that was many years before it ambitiously assumed the title of the Catholic Apostolic Church, Mr. Moddle at once joined it. It had been over and over again suggested to him by certain of the dignitaries of Zoar, who recognised his talents, that if he saw his way to accepting Anglican orders, there would be no difficulty on the part of the Bishop. But Mr. Moddle would

not be merged in this way among the inferior members of a body of clergy whom he affected, at all events, to despise. He would be a Triton among the minnows. He lived on sensation. His one absorbing idea was that society was running about with a pencil in its hand, taking down his sermons, and reproducing them in the most unlikely places. Not only did he deliberately accuse the dean and canons of appropriating his pulpit utterances as their own, but if anybody hazarded a theological idea in a descriptive work, or a three-volume novel, he asserted, and perhaps believed, they had stolen it from him at the little chapel of which he was appointed "angel," and where, I believe, my father is an "evangelist," down a back street in Zoar. It is strange that a man who is so sensible on most points should be so weak on this one; but we all of us have one or two soft places in our cerebral developments. I have found out a second soft place in Mr. Moddle's head—or heart—to-day.

The programme I laid out for myself was to go to morning service as usual, by way of sedative, then to call on Mr. Moddle, lay my case before him, get his advice, return and digest that advice along with early dinner ; take another sedative at afternoon service, and then give Percy his quietus—or the reverse. It was possible, if not probable, that what I might have to say would serve as anything rather than a sedative for him.

I wonder whether these things really do happen by chance, or whether that most unimpressionable Mr. Briggs, the precentor of Zoar cathedral, had some intuition of what would be my special needs when he set down that exquisite anthem which contains the soprano solo: "O that I had wings like a dove ; then would I flee away and *be at rest*." Surely that fair-haired boy, the first treble (whom, by the way, I know to be one of the most unmitigated little rips in Zoar) never sang and looked so like an angel as he did on this particular morning.

The precentor *must* have known how badly I wanted to flee away and be at rest. Could he have suspected that Alec had asked me to flee away and be at rest with him, and that I was more than half resolved that I *would* flee away and be at rest with him? Zoar is a very gossiping little place, but Mr. Briggs could scarcely have guessed that I had, this very afternoon, to decide the great fleeing-away-and-being-at-rest question on my own account. I really believe, though, that seraphic little rip of a chorister helped me in my decision as much as Mr. Moddle did. How strangely sacred words sometimes identify themselves with our secular concerns! I have a great idea that is why the Psalms have such a hold upon us. The transference from David's experiences to our own is often—as it was in my case this morning at cathedral—so easy and so natural. The secular frame of mind was, for the nonce, merged in the sacred.

It was no very unusual thing for me to

look in upon Mr. Moddle, even after I discontinued my attendance as a pupil, and I always felt as though I were back in my school days again, when his grim-visaged old housekeeper, Mrs. Bevan, opened the door to me, and ushered me into his little library. There he was, as usual, over his books, coaching up his next Sunday's sermon, from sources far more recondite than those which were probed by any dignitary in Zoar, and which had the effect of elevating his pulpit flights considerably over the heads of his hearers at the Irvingite chapel.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, laying down his pen as if he was glad to be interrupted; "this puts one in mind of old times, Elsie, does it not? I suppose I ought to apologize for my déshabille now, though, oughtn't I?"

"Don't apologize for anything, Mr. Moddle. I am not going to, though I have no right to interrupt you in your work; but I have a very serious matter about which I want to consult you, and which

will not allow either of us time for compliments."

"What is it; a question of scholarship, or"—he added, with a sly laugh—"some further questions as to the Welsh estates and Aunt Phillis's money?"

"Certainly not the former, and not exactly the latter. I want to consult you as to my marriage with Percy."

"You don't want to have the ceremony performed by me, do you? Remember I can't officiate at St. Hilda's, and your cousin is not likely to secede to us, whatever you may do."

"Don't laugh at me. I am very much in earnest." And I suppose I looked so, for he straightway became serious too.

"Depend upon it, Elsie, you shall have my best advice; but as to the main question, that is settled long ago, of course."

"Settled by everybody except those whom my legal as well as clerical cousin calls, grandiloquently enough, 'the contracting parties.' It is at this moment an open ques-

tion between Percy and me ; but I have to give him a final answer this very afternoon."

"Indeed!"

It is quite impossible to convey in writing the immense amount of meaning that Mr. Moddle compressed into this exceedingly commonplace exclamation.

"And you come to me instead of going to your father or any of your relations."

"Because, as you know, they could not possibly give me unprejudiced, dispassionate advice. You can."

"Yes," he said; and I believe tried his very best to look as though he could give that passionless counsel.

Pushing his books and manuscripts from him with an impetuosity which seemed to me to prove that he was going to enter on the subject *con amore*, he continued—

"When a patient goes to a doctor, or a client to a lawyer, for advice, the first requirement, I need not say, Elsie, is that the whole case shall be unreservedly laid before them."

“And such, too, is the case with a penitent coming to confess ; the second being that matters divulged in the consulting room, the private office, or the confessional, respectively, shall be kept secret.”

“Of course. Now for your case.”

“You know it all beforehand, but I will not assume such knowledge. There has been a tacit rather than a formal arrangement that I am to marry Percy.”

“For wise family reasons, I know.”

“You do not know, perhaps, that he now urges the immediate fulfilment of that arrangement.”

“Ah !”

“Though I think you know, or guess at all events, that this is not a marriage of love on my part. Do you know this?”

“Only as all Zoar knows it, by guessing. The guess is correct, is it not?”

“Neither on my side nor on his has affection the smallest part or lot in this matter. That we have openly stated either to other.”

"You don't mean it?"

"I do."

"But what is the alternative to this marriage?"

"Do you not guess that?"

"I have given up guessing for the moment. You are to tell me all, recollect."

"I will. I love some one else. Did you know that?"

"I have guessed that too ; but tell me who it is."

"Mr. Lund ; *did* you know ?"

"We are mixing up our parts as catechist and catechumen ; but I will answer you frankly I did not know—and I do not know now—that you love Mr. Lund."

"But I tell you so."

"I know you do ; yet that does not convince me in the least."

"That's not polite, Mr. Moddle."

"I thought you came for advice, not for politeness, Elsie. If you had informed me you came for politeness I should have told you at once that you had come to the wrong

person. If you want advice I can give you that."

"And I do want it bitterly. Here are the two alternatives. On the one side I am to propitiate my family by making myself miserable with a man whom I do not love, and who plainly tells me he does not love me; on the other, I have only to say the word to link my fate with one whose affection is beyond doubt, and whom I daily feel I love more than all other beings in this world. Which alternative shall I accept?"

"Neither."

This was more than I expected. I felt sure that Mr. Moddle would at once advise uncompromising obedience to my parents, and the fulfilment of Percy's wishes. I had come fully prepared for this, and determined to scorn the advice I was still so anxious to get. What strange anomalies we are, and how we juggle with ourselves in these matters! Well, at all events, here was one point gained. He did not scare me by passive non-resistance principles.

"You do not advise me to marry Percy?"

"I do not."

"You suggest that I should tell him this afternoon that I cannot carry out the family arrangement?"

"Decidedly."

I know I breathed more easily than I had done for a long time, and I feel sure I showed the exultation I experienced.

"Yet, on the other hand, you equally dissuade me from the other alternative?"

"Not equally, but much more strongly."

"And why?"

"The former course will cause some little temporary difficulty, and perhaps involve you in some amount of disagreeables with your family; the latter would alienate them altogether."

"I cannot imagine why."

"No, you cannot, but I can. Your Cousin Percy does not stand quite so high in the estimation of Zoar in general, or his own family in particular, as he fancies he

does ; but even he is immeasurably more in favour than Mr. Lund."

"How utterly unjust ! They cannot know him. My family do not guess that he loves me."

"They will not be likely to think the better of him for making known that fact to you whilst he was aware you were engaged to your cousin."

"Then your advice is that I discard both of my lovers and deliberately adopt a life of single blessedness ?"

"No ; I did not say so."

"Then what is your alternative ? For pity's sake, Mr. Moddle, do not trifle with me. Recollect I have no one else to advise me. Do speak plainly."

"Very plainly ?"

"O yes."

"Marry *me*."

If he had fired off a gun or got up and executed a maniacal war-dance around the table, he would have astonished me far less. I looked straight into his face, hoping that I

should see some sign he was making fun of me. Alas! I saw that he was in serious earnest, and that his advice was not dispassionate. I could not say a word, or even resist his holding my hand while he continued—

“Elsie, you are surprised to hear these words from me. You think of me as an old man, and deem that I look on you as a child in comparison. I have tried to do so. I have striven, you know how successfully, to stamp out this love for you—a love which has spread itself over many, many years; even when you *were* a child, and used to sit here day after day and fascinate me with your presence. I believed, until this moment, that my love was utterly hopeless—that you would sacrifice yourself, and fulfil your engagement with your cousin, so I made no sign. Now I find that such is not the case, and oh, how glad I am to see that you deliberately put from you such a hideous future! I am emboldened to tell you a secret that I thought would have died with me.

Elsie, darling, I love you more than life, more than——”

“Mr. Moddle, let me go,” I said, and tore my hand from his grasp, which tightened upon it at every word he uttered. “This is madness—this is worse still—ridiculous.”

“And why, Elsie? You have told me you do not love your cousin.”

“But I told you in the same breath that I loved another.”

“And I tell you that you do not, cannot love that other, for he is unworthy of you.”

“I will not listen to this,” I said, and rose to go, but he detained me almost by force; at least he looked as though he would have used force if I resisted him. He seized my hand again, and put me back in my chair. I could not choose but hear.

“You came to me for advice——”

“And you meanly take advantage of that to plead your own preposterous cause.”

“You are making use of some strong

terms: meanness, ridiculous, preposterous; but I will not let them anger me—at least not yet.”

“Be as angry as you like, I shall simply leave you.”

“Not until you have heard me out. I am going to talk business for a moment now, not to make love. Will you listen?”

“With that proviso, yes.”

“Your father’s affairs are hopelessly embarrassed. He has borrowed largely from your Uncle Edward, and even parted with his share in Topaz.”

“To him?”

“Yes, to him. So has your Aunt Phillis; and of course there will be no difficulty with your Uncle Sam. Topaz virtually belongs to your Uncle Edward, and can only be yours by your marrying Percy.”

“Never!”

“Then, as you know, and as I have long known, your Aunt Phillis leaves you her money only on condition of your not marrying Mr. Lund.”

“ I am weary of all this talk about money. I will marry Alec, though I lose every farthing.”

“ And leave your father a beggar. I am not romancing. It will come to that.”

“ I do not, and will not believe it. Besides, if such were true, the third alternative would be mine, not yours. I am as wearied of matrimonial as of money matters.”

“ Do not say so, dear Elsie. Your marriage with me—nay, hear me for one moment—though it might alienate you from one branch of your family, would have no such effect with your dear parents ; your anxiety about whom I fully appreciate, since it led you even to contemplate a marriage with your cousin. I am not a rich man, but I am not a poor one. Can you not see in me a third alternative, if I may say so, midway between the death in life of a marriage without love and the possibly ephemeral passion of a man you have known so short a time ? Will you give me a hope ? Will you, at all events, refrain from saying

'no' now? Think of it, as you have been thinking of the other two alternatives."

"Not for one instant. You are breaking your promise when you recur to such an impossible proposal. It is best to speak plainly; I would rather marry Percy."

I had never realized until the occurrence of this remarkable love-passage how ugly Mr. Moddle was. I knew he was not handsome, but his hideousness culminated when he took my hand and leered his horrible love-looks at me. Now the passion died out of his face, and was succeeded by a look of fiendish malignity, as he said—

"Be it so; you have made your choice. Accept that alternative; marry Percy, if you will, but you shall not marry Lund."

"Shall not! Who dares say so?"

"I do. Listen again. I am not in the least afraid of your betraying my secret—for I bid you keep it as one—but I caution you not to harbour the slightest idea of that mad marriage you speak of. You shall not even select the lot of single blessedness you

hinted at. You *shall* marry either Percy or me."

"Your imperative moods are simply silly," I rejoined, with a scornful laugh. "Who is to make me? You?"

"No; your father. His ruin or his salvation—perhaps his life or death—will depend on it."

"Mr. Moddle, I have hitherto considered you, not only my true friend, but a sane man. I am grievously disappointed in the former idea; do not give me occasion to doubt the latter too."

"I care not what you doubt, Elsie. At the risk of your displeasure, I again tell you that no family arrangements—no pretended passion of one who cannot know and love you as I do will ever be to you what my love——"

That horrible look came over him again, and he was meditating a dive at my hand. I could not get away, for he prisoned me in the chair; but I could reach the bell, and I rang a tremendous peal. The grim-

visaged housekeeper answered it immediately ; so very quickly, indeed, as to suggest the possibility that she had been listening at the door. Mr. Moddle was back among his books and MSS. in a moment, and said, with a composure which was really admirable under the circumstances—

“ Good morning, Elsie. Show Miss Llewellyn out, if you please, Mrs. Bevan.”

When I got into the open air I really did not know whether to laugh or cry at what had occurred, so I compromised the matter by doing neither the one nor the other. Certainly among the possibilities that could have occurred to me as resulting from my visit, the very last would have been a deliberate proposal of marriage from Mr. Moddle. I had gone with the hope of freeing myself from my matrimonial embarrassments, and lo ! I had added to them. Was I a Helen of Troy that every one must act Paris or Menelaus to me ? I began this narrative with what I believe to have been an honest

appraisement of my personal attractions, and I have no reason to believe that any fairy Rachel had suddenly made me beautiful for ever, yet I found myself in the predicament of having no less than three candidates for my hand, two of them expecting answers within a few hours, and the third, and last, still writhing under the unceremonious congé I had just given him. Captain Macheath's position was a trifle compared with mine.

I carried out my programme to the letter, and after taking a short walk in the environs of Zoar, to collect my scattered thoughts, I went home to dinner, though what I had to digest was very different from what I expected. I scarcely gave Percy or Alec a thought. All my meditation was devoted to that ridiculous old Moddle. Could it be that he was playing an outrageous trick upon me? Even now, I can scarcely believe that this morning's episode was real. I should like to be able to think he was merely acting a part; but that is not possible.

In the calm of the afternoon service all my excitement died away, and I became able to look at my future course as a simple matter of duty. I cannot think I did wrong in paying very little attention to the actual service, and rather letting the genius loci and the tranquil influences of the music and prayers sway my judgment on the one subject uppermost in my thoughts. I doubt whether it is necessary, as clergymen tell us, to leave the world outside the church porch as we enter the House of God. Rather do I think we ought to carry all our burdens in thither along with us and have them lightened. Here again old David's experience seemed exactly to stand over against my own. Like him I had sought to understand this complication that was pressing upon me, but it was "too hard for me—until I went into the sanctuary." Then I understood.

I might, under ordinary circumstances, have been somewhat disquieted to find, as I emerged from the cathedral, my Cousin

Percy pacing up and down the green, as I knew he would be, but not alone. Mr. Moddle was with him, and left when he saw me coming. Was it possible that he had betrayed me? He certainly promised, by implication, if not in actual words, that he would keep my secret as though it had been imparted in the confessional, and as inviolate as he knew I would keep his, though he had extracted no promise from me, but rather irritated me by daring me to divulge it. It might have been fancy, but I thought I could see signs on Percy's face that he was prepared for what I had to say.

"Will you give me your decision here, or shall we walk farther before we enter on the matter?" he said, in a cold hard voice, which I flatter myself I imitated very successfully when I replied—

"There is no need of a rural expedition; I can give it in a monosyllable."

"Of how many letters—two or three?"

"Two."

"Be it so," was his only reply; but he

scowled savagely upon me with his cruel black eyes, turned upon his heel and left me standing alone in the middle of the cathedral green. He then walked at a quick pace in the same direction as Mr. Moddle had gone, and with the evident intention of overtaking him.

So the deed was done. I saw Alec sitting as usual at his window ; then, before Percy had left me one minute, and long before he passed out of the wicket which led from the green, Alec was by my side. Holding my unresisting hand in his own, he said, "I know what your answer will be to me now, dear Elsie. I saw the unceremonious way in which your cousin left you. Your mind is made up ; you will take me for better or for worse."

"Till death us do part, dear Alec," I replied, continuing his own quotation.

Then we did what we had never done before : paced the cathedral green arm in arm and in full light of day. We walked across to the deanery with the Very Reverend

himself preceded by the verger with his silver mace, both of them in full canonicals, and had a brief gossip with Mrs. Dean afterwards. She looked very sly, but said nothing; and the lay vicars and chorister-boys were evidently making their observations too at the unexpected conjunction they beheld. As for the chance passers-by who saw us cross the green in procession with the two cathedral dignitaries (for Wiggins the verger deemed himself one), I am sure they thought we had been married off-hand at afternoon service, uncanonical though the hour might be, and were returning triumphantly with the officiating priest.

Let me pause here, and, recalling the intense feeling of relief I experienced at the decisive step I had taken, counsel any young lady who may read these remarks and who may be suffering, as I have been, from a plethora of lovers, to halt between two opinions no longer, but definitely make up her mind and act as her conscience dictates. I am not alluding to a mere

flirtation, of course ; in that case two strings to one's bow are quite allowable, or any number of strings for the matter of that. I cannot believe that my position this morning was altogether an exceptional one. Cases must continually occur where duty seems to pull one way and inclination another. I do not pretend to determine which of the conflicting forces should under the circumstances be allowed to sway conduct; but I do suggest that the decision should be made, and so the misery avoided which results from a life—if not a heart—divided against itself.

I wonder how I should have felt if my course had been reversed ; if I had put three letters into my monosyllabic answer to Percy and given Alec his congé. I wonder whether I should have written that excellent advice to my plethorically-loved sisters then !

Of course I had no secrets from dear Alec now. I defied Mr. Moddle, and told him the whole truth about the morning's episode, even including the damaging obser-

ventions that had been made about himself.

"I cannot understand," I said, "how it is you have such a bad character in Zoar, Alec."

"Not by the revelation of this morning?"

"No, not even under that light. *Do* you drink, gamble, and otherwise throw stumbling-blocks in the way of our local Grundies when I am not by to keep you respectable?"

"Your local Grundies are no others than Percy Llewellyn and Thomas Moddle, Elsie. I have traced every scandalous report about myself to them."

"And yet you took no notice?"

"What need was there? Let them rave. Am I not a philosopher?"

"But then, Alec dear," I urged, quite belying my own feelings, which ran thoroughly with his own, "your philosophy seems to sanction the Grundy reports by your silence. It may complicate still farther our position when you come to speak to

papa. You will have to go through that interesting process, you know."

"Of course. I shall make an appointment with your father for to-morrow morning, and it will be strange indeed if I cannot talk down two scandalmongers."

"They will have the first word, and are, I doubt not, at this moment prejudicing as far as they can the home authorities against us."

"Shall we go to High Street at once and circumvent them?"

"I think not. Do as you propose and leave the rest to me. I have learnt the advisability of acting promptly and decisively in these crises by the approval which I feel in my own conscience at this moment. If the combination is too strong for us, then we must take the law into our own hands."

"Bolt?"

"Yes. You do not think it unwomanly of me to allude to your pet project, do you?"

"You are an angel, Elsie."

Of course I cannot help putting down some of the sweet as well as the complimentary things that are said to me. That is the disadvantage of a diary or an autobiography (I scarcely know which to call this). At the same time, I am not going to chronicle *all* the tender remarks Alec made to me during that long walk this afternoon. What bold plans we formed as we looked down the dim vista of our future blended life. I hesitated whether I should write "life" or "lives;" but are we not to be—nay, are we not even now—one? We were both to work with the brains God had given us, and carve out fortune, not only for ourselves, but for my belongings; he had none, dear fellow, except myself. I felt if my dear impetuous old father could have heard him talk in the way he did to me (I mean as far as the practical business portion of our conversation went) he would have set at nought all possible opposition, and cast in his broken fortunes with our own then and there.

But my narrative of this strange eventful day is not yet done, and I must not sit up late again to-night, for I have another trying morrow before me.

When I bade Alec good-by and went home, I fully expected to find Percy and Mr. Moddle there, or, at all events, to discover some signs that they had been there, but there were none. I thought my dear father seemed a little silent and serious at tea-time, and my mother reflected, as she always did, his changeful temperament. There was nothing very noticeable, however, and it was agreed that I should say nothing until Alec's letter arrived in the evening. I came upstairs as usual, and was, of course, not at all surprised to receive a summons from Hannah to the effect that my father wanted to speak to me downstairs. I felt a little flutter as I rose to go. My great fear was lest Percy should be present, but the servant, in answer to my query, informed me that no one was there, and I was quite sure that whatever course

the dear old people felt bound to adopt would be not only kindly meant, but considerately put to me.

When I arrived in the cozy oaken parlour I found my father and mother sitting, not as I expected, over Alec's letter, but over their account books, as usual. They both looked worried, and my father said—

“Elsie, I have bad news for you. Business has not thriven with me of late, and I am in difficulties.”

“Money difficulties?”

“Yes, dear; none but what can, I hope, be tided over; but in the meantime I want you to——”

“Marry Percy?” I could not help saying.

“No, dear. I don't think your Uncle Edward, or even Percy, would like that while I am in straits. No; I want you just to put aside all matrimonial ideas for the present, and help me out of this hobble. You will; won't you?”

“My dear, dear father, of course I will do

anything you ask me; but what is it? Shall I go out as governess, or——”

“Not at this moment, Elsie, though it may come to that, for things look very ugly. What I want you to do is to accept an invitation which has come from your Uncle Sam, and go to London by the early train to-morrow morning.”

“To London!”

“Yes, dear.”

“But if a time of difficulty is coming, surely the proper place for me is at your side.”

“If you had been a man, yes,” interposed my mother; “but as you made what you so often call the mistake of being a girl, you see, you would only be in the way,” and she tried very ineffectually to smile.

“But if I am a girl, you are a woman, dear mother. Will you not come with me?”

“A woman, yes; but a thorough woman of business,” replied my father; “and, as you know, my factotum. You will, I am sure, do as we ask you, Elsie. If you are here I

shall be worried by this matter ; but if you will only go away, though it mayn't be complimentary to say so, we shall get on swimmingly."

"I will, as I need not say, do everything you wish ; but I cannot help feeling you are only sending me away that I may escape the annoyance which I ought surely to share with you."

"And I assure you, on the contrary," answered my father, "that I only send you away to save myself from the burthen of your presence. Is that plain-spoken enough, Elsie? Your Uncle Edward will pull me through this easily ; but he makes it a stipulation that you shall be off the premises. Now," he added, closing his books and packing up his papers with an air of finality, "if you want to oblige me and your mother, and to save me from any possible worry, you will not talk any more about these business matters, or your still more perplexing matrimonial arrangements."

That was all. We had a merry evening, and were certainly more jovial than usual at supper. I could not find it in my heart to thrust my own selfish affairs upon my parents ; though I felt quite sure the course I had adopted, while it might not look so promising as the previous arrangements just at first, would be the best in the long run. Like my father, I am of a mercurial disposition, and have considerable power of laying my difficulties on one side, acting in the meantime as though they did not exist, and only resuming the consideration of them when absolutely necessary.

I wonder what my father meant by my “still more perplexing matrimonial arrangements.”

In order not to cause him unnecessary “perplexity” at such a crisis, I took the opportunity of running to the street-door when Alec’s letter arrived in due course, and confiscating that document, while I sent back by the messenger who brought it, a

note I had previously prepared, to this effect—

“DEAREST ALEC,—A complication has occurred ; nothing serious as affecting ourselves, but touching only my father’s business. I am going to London by the early train to-morrow. You can run down a few stations with me if you like ; I want to speak to you, and in the meantime I refrain from letting your epistle reach my father.

“ Yours ever,

“ ELSIE.”

I anticipate a future entry in this diary, just to say that Alec did accompany me, not a few stations down the line, but all the way to London. He walked as far as the ticket station, which is a little way from Zoar Terminus, and got in there : while—wonderful to relate—we had a carriage to ourselves all the hundred and odd miles from Zoar to the metropolis.

When I came upstairs to my own quiet room, after sitting unusually late with my father and mother, I did my little matter of packing all by myself, insisting on that dear good soul, my mother, going to bed, or she would have remained up half the night to see that I had every requisite in my portmanteau for making a presentable appearance before Uncle Sam and Aunt Patty, of whom she stood in considerable awe. When this was finished I took this book, which I kept out to the very last, and sat down to make my final entry in it.

I do not know what vague apprehension oppresses me, but I feel just as though I were leaving Zoar and my dear old home for ever. It may be that I stopped up too late last night, and am over-tired; but then I always feel this when I am parting from a person or a place for the shortest time. I feel, I mean, as though we could never, by any possibility, meet again. I try to-night to reason myself out of this feeling in reference to Zoar and my home, but it is no use.

Though I know I am only going for a week or two, I feel just as if I were saying good-bye for ever. I should like to go as Alcestis did on the eve of her death, and look at every room, every nook and cranny of the dear old house. I would, if I were quite sure I should not disturb any one, but old Hannah sleeps with one eye permanently open, and would feel certain I was a robber.

How glad I am that I did not suffer this new "matrimonial perplexity" in the shape of Alec's letter to reach my dear, dear father. I wonder to what extent his business difficulties have gone. I hope, and feel sure, that Mr. Moddle exaggerated them. At all events, my Uncle Edward will, of course, take care that he—that we—do not suffer. Let him have Topaz if he likes. I can look at that now as complacently as at the loss of Aunt Phillis's money, which is, of course, involved in my projected marriage with Alec. Sometimes thoughts of this kind make me feel quite hard about Zoar, though I am conscious of injustice in harbouring

such ideas. Let us go, I say to myself, and lead a Bohemian life in London. There are scores of different openings for men and women like Alec and myself there. The kind of qualifications we possess—the “cleverness” to wit which is assigned to me—would be utterly unprolific in Zoar but convertible into money in London. Let the worrying old shop go, and the father and mother depend upon our exertions for the rest of their lives, even if they reaped nothing from the relinquishment of the business. I even picture the dear Copperfield cottage in the suburbs of London, where we could be all so happy and comfortable, if once the wrench from Zoar could be got over; and why not? Will it not be home wherever Alec is with me—with us?

Vague ideas of a Pantisocracy like that of dreamy opium-eating Coleridge come over me. Let us return to the condition of the noble savage. Alec shall shoot parrots, I will cook them, and the old people sit cozily in their log-hut and eat them; my

father's sole occupation being to smoke the calumet of peace, and go down to his grave with the honoured ease of a patriarchal chief. Of course all this would look very romantic if anybody were ever going to read it. Alec may have that privilege one of these days, but nobody else—no third parties. If a girl is not to be romantic on the evening of a day when she has refused two offers and accepted a third, then romance must have died out from our midst altogether, and we must be in very truth the nation of shopkeepers we are falsely represented on the other side of the English Channel.





CHAPTER VI.

UNCLE SAM.

I SEE evident symptoms that this diary is going to expand into a story after all; not a sensational story, perhaps—in fact, there is no appearance of anything like sensation in it at present—but still a story. At the same time, as I warned my readers at the outset, it must of necessity be the most inartistic thing possible, because I just link together scraps of my diary with this sort of running commentary. In all other respects the diary itself is the story. Of course I do not say this to disarm criticism. Mr. Moddle used to say there was no such thing as criticism now-a-days; in fact he did not know when there had been. It used to be political, he said, and was now

personal. If you had rendered yourself obnoxious to a person or a clique who had the entrée to a newspaper, you might write like an archangel and yet get bullied, or, worse still, passed over in silence. The fact was, Mr. Moddle had published a volume or two himself, and never got noticed at all. He would have preferred any amount of adverse criticism to silence ; and so he railed against critics and criticism in general. There would be no fair criticism, he averred, as long as critics wrote anonymously. The public were entitled to know who was praising or blaming, just as much as—nay, more than—who was writing what was lauded or the reverse.

As it was, one big organ set the example of praise, blame, or silence, and all the small fry followed suit. This was what Mr. Moddle said ; but I received it all with a good deal of suspicion, because I knew he had reason for his grudge against reviewers.

I am writing this amid surroundings which seem to me to form exactly the

antipodes of Zoar. I am in the heart of London, yet not the London of which I have had previous glimpses in the visits I paid with my father to the great metropolis. Then we used to stop at Anderton's Hotel, Fleet Street, see all the stock sights during the day, except just when my father was paying his visits to the city warehouses, when he would leave me in pawn at St. Paul's, the National Gallery, or the British Museum, and invariably wind up with a theatre in the evening. We never made known the date of our advent to my relatives in Gower Street until the Sunday came round, when we would take an early dinner with Uncle Sam and Aunt Patty, and go "to hear" some Evangelical or Nonconformist luminary in the evening, leaving before supper-time, for we both liked warm suppers, and Gower Street held cooking to be wrong. It seemed, I remember thinking when I was quite a child, as though it were always Sunday at Gower Street; and the day answered but slenderly

to its bright and happy etymology. It was essentially a day of gloom, and everybody was glad to get a long sleep in the afternoon, so as to abridge the monotony as much as possible. That Sunday siesta was a real blessing—a green oasis amid the desert of Gower Street existence. I only wonder my uncle and aunt did not think it “wrong.”

Those relatives of mine seem to be always engaged in “hearing” somebody or other; it does not matter who, as long as they are not “High.” Gower Street in this respect is a very focus and headquarters of metropolitan Evangelicalism, which culminates in what my Aunt Patty terms her Wednesday “T. and P.” Those mysterious initials represent “Tea and Prayers.” The consumption of Bohea is enormous, for ministers and ladies predominate. Then there is conversation—the common English for which is scandal—and in the midst of this, Bibles are handed round on a tray, and the entertainment concludes (but not for

a very long time) with exposition and prayers. The number and variety of doctrines broached at these religious exercises is infinite ; and the prayers, which would seem scarcely to admit of much divergence of opinion, are decidedly the most dogmatic of all. The only common basis on which these jarring theologians meet, is the dogma that the Pope is the "Man of Sin." We are held to be religious at Zoar ; but I am thankful to say our religion is of a very different order from this. What puzzles me is how Uncle Sam can possibly remain a member of the Established Church, and yet hear the State religion run down so tremendously as it is by all his guests at T. and P.

I suppose it is very uncharitable, but the idea sometimes strikes me, that both Uncle Sam and his clerical friends of the Church of England stick to the Establishment because it *pays*. The clergymen virtually say as much. They say, "Of course the High Church party would like us to go out,

and leave them all the loaves and fishes ; and Dean Stanley would like us to secede, so that he might put Broad Church people into all the best things." Even the Dissenters who frequent T. and P. seem, if I may say so, to have caught a sort of Church flavour, and aver that they do not wish the Church of England to be abolished. Their policy is constructive and comprehensive, they say ; not destructive and narrow ; which, I fancy, being interpreted, means that they believe a millennial change to be imminent, and that concurrent endowment will be its chief characteristic. In the meantime, they do not wish Church property to be secularized. A particularly broad-bottomed pastor once gave it out at T. and P. that the millennium had actually commenced, and he parodied Wren's epitaph by saying, "Circumspice"—only he called it *circumspicy*—"for do we not see," he asked, "the Establishmentarian taking tea with the Nonconformist, the Wesleyan sitting down with the Indepen-

dent, and the very Irvingites eating crumpets like the elect?"

But the most marvellous point about this strange combination, is the nature of Uncle Sam's own avocations. He is called, vaguely enough, a "legal gentleman," and had, I believe, made preparations for entering the same profession as his brother Edward, but stopped short somewhere on the wrong side of the Rubicon. Yet still he has his "offices" at the West End, and appears to do a very large and mysterious business of some kind. Alec knows what it is, and makes pointed remarks about it, when I tell him of T. and P. I confess, I have my suspicions too, seeing that Alec will insist upon calling my eminently respectable relative by the suggestive title of "Old Sixty per Cent."

I am not at all sure that this same Alec and myself felt properly grateful to the Great Western Railway Company for the efforts they make towards abridging the journey between the West country and

London. Looking back upon the happy hours I have just spent, it really seems to me as though we simply got into the carriage at Zoar and forthwith disembarked at Paddington; at least the only portion of the time that dragged at all was between the terminus and the ticket-station, when Alec joined me, and had made matters all right with the guard so that we should be sure to have a carriage to ourselves all the way. I really repented of my extravagance in going by ordinary train, and thought we might just as well have economized and gone by the Parliamentary, as we were in no sort of hurry. I was quite amused to find our reserved compartment labelled "engaged" at the junction, and told Alec he need not have advertised the fact of poor Percy being jilted so publicly as all that came to.

"I feel, Elsie dear," the darling fellow said (though I, of course, soften down the dialogue for publication), "as though we had made our first start in life to-day. For once in my sombre existence I do not feel lonely."

“And I, Alec, for the first time since I have known you, feel other than a dreadful hypocrite. The way I have burdened my conscience on your account is simply fearful to contemplate.”

“And are you happy now, Elsie?”

“Were it not for the news of my father’s difficulties, I could answer ‘yes’ unreservedly. And you?”

“Without reservation ‘yes’—at least——”

“Ah! what, you have a saving clause too?”

“Only one that I know has occurred to you likewise, for we have often discussed it. You will guess what I mean.”

“Our difference of opinion on religious details?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think that distresses you much, Alec; so don’t be hypocritical and manufacture a grievance on that score.”

“But you would be glad if we could think alike?”

“Yes; and I feel no doubt we shall.”

“What, you are going to convert me, eh?”

“Even that is on the cards, as you would say; but I was not thinking of that. I do believe we shall find common ground, somehow, though. Do you wish it?”

“From my heart. Now we are one in all else I should like us to be united in belief.”

“Or disbelief. You want to convert me, do you?”

“I am not sure that I do. My creed has the disadvantage of isolation. There is something cheerless in doubt. It suited my previous condition of existence; but is scarcely compatible with my feeling so like a Benedict as I do to-day. Is not this like starting on our honeymoon?”

“Be quiet. Does it not prove how much our creed is at the mercy of our feelings, how thoroughly religion is of the heart rather than of the head, and how foolishly we omit the emotional nature of man as a factor in questions of faith? I would

guarantee to convert you into a decent Churchman before we got to Swindon."

"At which point I might take up the good work, and each of us land red-hot Ultramontanists at Paddington ready to be received by Monsignor Capel next day into the capacious embrace of the Catholic Church."

"And commence our blended life as a pair of 'verts. We will wait awhile for that, though, wont we?"

"I think so. *Festina lentè.*"

I never before realized how true an idea is conveyed in that expression, "the glory of motion," as I did in this particular railway journey. When I set out from home, clouds seemed to gather round my present and future, which even the presence of Alec could not quite dispel. A little while, and these were gone. Then there reappeared on the horizon the intense satisfaction of feeling that I had spoken out; that I was no longer walking about with a lie in my right hand. Even the sacrifice of Mr.

Moddle on the altar of my affection for Alec no longer discomposed me though I knew I had left two dangerous enemies behind who might work me harm through those near and dear to me. But who, on that balmy summer day, and under circumstances such as ours, could dream of disquiet? It was something to see written on Alec's face the signs that all his loneliness had passed away; it was much to sit with his dear hand enfolding mine, while we two were as isolated from the world as though we had found the poetic lodge in the vast wilderness; but more still was the sensation of glorious motion through the beautiful country that seemed to unrol like a panorama before us. What wonder that I surrendered myself to the easy epicureanism it suggested? Shelley's musical lines to the Skylark kept pacing through my mind—that is, of course, when Alec's still more musical voice was not vibrating there—and my former and my present life were perfectly illustrated in that happy contrast:—

“ We look before and after,
And pine for what is not :
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught ;
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of
saddest thought.

“ Yet if we could scorn
Hate, and pride, and fear ;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever could
come near.”

There are some few green spots in the desert pilgrimage of life to which memory constantly recurs, and rests in them, when we are in the mood of looking “ before and after ;” and I feel sure this, our first railway journey, will be one of these oases for us. Even now it seems as though it had occurred a long time ago, and the reminiscence already brought repose. I am prisoned on the second-floor back spare-room of one of those grimy houses in Gower Street, which look as though their faces wanted washing ; and yet I seem to see still the green fields apparently pirouetting around us as we sped through them, the white cottages, or

picturesque hamlets, with the blue smoke lazily curling up through the summer air; anon a trim town either sped through with a dash, or detaining us awhile at a station, and then away again, off amid the green fields, browsing cattle, and startled horses, once more. I think, if I were a very rich person, and of course supposing I had so agreeable a companion as Alec, I should be tempted to make long infructuous journeys nowhither by rail, and back again, just to enjoy this same glory of motion.

When Uncle Sam met me at Paddington Station, Alec and I had shot off by some centrifugal action into the most distant corners of the carriage, and that dear awkward fellow took such a time collecting his coats and portmanteaus, and changing his travelling cap, when the train stopped, that my relative had got me well into a growler before it could be seen who my fellow-traveller had been. We had taken a somewhat protracted farewell in advance, and arranged the Regent's Park as our rendez-

vous for the morrow, since I knew my Uncle Sam would be off to his office, and Aunt Patty to her district-visiting, leaving me ample time on my hands for seeing Alec. We agreed it was better he should not be introduced to my relatives in London until the same process had been previously adopted with my parents. I have no notion of Uncle Sam knowing my prospective husband before even my dear father and mother do.

Uncle Sam always dresses in a sleek suit of black, with white tie, and wears a long beard, just beginning to turn white too, as if to match his neckcloth. This gives him a venerable appearance—as venerable, Alec says, as that of Calcraft himself—to whose avocations, he adds, there is a good deal that is analogous in my uncle's business.

“I have experienced, though in a very slender degree, Elsie, the delicate attentions of that fraternity to which your uncle belongs, and know only too well how they can smile, and murder while they smile.”

If I should live to the age of the Patriarchs (which Heaven forefend), I shall never fail to associate the idea of cold mutton with that of Gower Street existence. My Uncle Sam and Aunt Patty seem to me to live in an atmosphere of this not very tasty viand. On Sundays I know they have it because they think cooking wrong; and I fancy that the fact of its forming the *pièce de resistance* on so many days during the week results from the position lately assumed by this estimable couple on the subject of creature comforts in general. They are all “carnal,” and I shall never be surprised to find my relatives develope into Vegetarians and Teetotallers. They were very much the reverse once; Sam was a bit of a gourmet, just as Patty is said to have been a regular flirt before Sam bore her off in triumph from a garrison town; and they astonished the officers who had been her admirers and my uncle’s customers, by going in rather severely for “goody” principles and practice. I was uncommonly

hungry after my long journey, and could have made a good meal on even more tasteless food, supposing such to have been procurable. But when I glanced from one end of the table to the other, and saw my aunt's lugubrious face and my uncle's less melancholy visage trying to look resigned to the cold mutton and plain boiled potatoes which succeeded a thin soup, and were to be followed by a rice pudding, I could scarcely help bursting out laughing, and saying, in my own hoydenish fashion—

“ You good, pious, uninteresting people, is it possible you ever enjoyed your food, or behaved in other respects like reasonable folks ?”

I did not, I am thankful to say, so far forget myself; but I fancy I must have looked rather waggish, for Aunt Patty pulled a longer face than usual, and said—

“ You don't seem to take your father's difficulties to heart much, Elsie. It is a marvellous dispensation of Providence, is it not ?” and she wiped a sympathetic tear,

which was rather understood than expressed, from her eye. Aunt Patty had been pretty once, and was comely still; a little dollish, but fair enough to look upon when she did not think it wrong to smile.

“Indeed, aunt, I do; but then I am one of the undemonstrative sort, you know. As to its being a mysterious dispensation, I think it is pretty well explained in the way of cause and effect; though that, of course, does not make it less providential.”

“Of course not,” echoed my uncle, “and what is your theory of cause and effect, Elsie?”

“My dear father is too easy, and trusts everybody too readily and too implicitly. He has not improved his business by his Nonconformist experiences.”

“You would not have him sacrifice his convictions to his interests, would you?” asked my aunt, parenthetically.

“Certainly not. I am only stating facts. Then I am aware he has borrowed largely.”

At this my Uncle Sam, who blushes like

a girl on the slightest provocation, reddened to the very tip of his Roman nose. I thought my father had been borrowing, and that Uncle Sam, as well as Uncle Edward, had been "accommodating" him. This rubicundity convinced me my random shot had taken effect, and that my previous idea was correct. My poor father had indeed fallen among thieves, and his foes were literally of his own household.

The unctuous pretence of sympathy made by this estimable pair is something which I would rather not repeat in detail. I clung as long as I possibly could to a vague hope that I might have been doing my relatives an injustice; but I can no longer disguise from myself the fact that my father and myself are victims of an infamous conspiracy. Alec has frequently insinuated such an idea; Mr. Moddle did not deny it, and, by his reticent manner, aroused my suspicions; but now I know it, and am determined to join Alec hand and glove, as they say, in his endeavours to unravel the

family mystery. Of course, now Mr. Moddle has gone over to the conspirators too, it is almost a case of Athanasius contra mundum; but in this instance, Alec and I—unorthodox though we be—represent the champion of orthodoxy, and I feel that with us union is strength.

It was settled unanimously, first, that I was too tired to go and “hear” Mr. Somebody-or-other at Bedford Row that evening; secondly, that I should have to earn my living, and probably support my parents too. At least, I could see that was the line chalked out by the conspirators, of whom I shall now speak in their collective capacity, and take Uncle Sam, for the time being, as my representative man.

“Think over what I have been saying, dear Elsie,” he said, as he was sallying forth to week-day church. “Really I think dear William will be better off in a little suburban cottage, with perhaps some slight employment in the way of law-stationery, and you with a nice daily engagement.

We shall be so glad to have you all near us, shan't we, Patty?"

"*So* glad," echoed Patty, with a female Judas-kiss. So the door closed on this well-matched pair, and I mounted to my second-floor back, to meditate and write.

I always did hate people who keep on calling you, and everybody belonging to you, "dear," as though you needed to be continually reminded how affectionate they were, or you would be sure to forget it. Sam and Patty are always treating me to this moral raspberry jam; and as for their talk one to the other in public, it is all "Petty Pops," and "darling hubby," or "wifey." In private, all the world knows that they quarrel like cats. If I must have raspberry jam at all, I like it spread smoothly and equally, not a great dab of sweet here, and a lump of hard crust there; but then I am, as I said, undemonstrative; some folks call me cold and apathetic. I cannot gush.

So the days have sped on at Gower

Street; or no, that is not the word. Things never speed here. The days succeeded one another in wearisome monotony, broken only by episodes of T. and P., and stirred here and there with letters from home. My father wrote in good spirits—I am condensing the remainder of my Gower Street diary, and therefore speak in the past tense—but I feared then, and know now, he was disguising the difficulties of his position. There was scarcely any reference to my break with Percy, though I could find they were aware of it, and indeed I had approached the subject in my own letters home. On my part, however, I felt it would be really selfish to force my foolish love-affairs on my parents, when they were in such difficulties in other respects, especially as the line I had adopted was calculated to increase rather than diminish those difficulties; and my father and mother were so exceedingly delicate on all these matters that I knew they would never touch on them except I led the way. Scarcely anything,

therefore, was said. Percy was only casually mentioned along with my Uncle Edward, who was, my father said, actively endeavouring to make the best of what all feared was a very bad job. Not a word about Mr. Moddle; and I dared not ask.

"Alec," I said, one day, at last, when we had been disporting ourselves in the formal walks of the Regent's Park, much as we used to do in the vicinity of Zoar, "I can bear this no longer!"

"What? This cockney Paradise, eh?"

"No; but my present existence altogether. It seems to me that I am mooning away my time, and making you do the same, leaving the dear, good old people at home to get out of their hot water, or bear its discomforts as best they may. Let us go back to Zoar, or do something, at all events."

"I'm rather glad to hear that sentiment from you, Elsie. In fact, shall I confess? I have been a bit disappointed to find it has not existed before."

“It has existed, but——”

“Well, that it has not come to the surface before.”

“That horrible Gower Street existence turns one into an absolute mummy; but, my dear Alec, if I have been lethargic, so have you. One would think you were qualifying for the Fellowship of the Zoological Society, instead of anything on the foundation of your own University, to see the diligent way in which you study the manners and customs of those interesting animals.

“Exactly, but that’s your fault. My studies of animated nature are limited to the occasions when I take you out. We have found the Zoological Gardens very convenient.”

“But I don’t hear that you are doing anything when you do not meet me; and our meetings are not so frequent as in Zoar. I repeat I fear I have encouraged you to moon like myself.”

“Then please disabuse yourself of the idea, as far as I am concerned, Elsie. I

have been busier than ever I was in my life before, in the intervals between our mutual visits to the Zoological Gardens."

"Busy! In what way? Please give an account of yourself, sir. I have heard of nothing beyond days spent at the reading-room of the British Museum, and evenings devoted to the theatre. Not much business in either of those pursuits, I fancy."

"My own Elsie has evidently eaten of something for breakfast in the serene retirement of Gower Street which does not quite suit her digestion." This was always Alec's rationale of my being in a bad temper. I had eaten something that disagreed with me—something acid, and the acidity had transferred itself to my disposition.

"Let me, however, explain," he continued, "since I do not see the use of unnecessary mystery. I *have* been doing business even in those unlikely localities. In the first place, I have written to the Oxenford folks and learnt that there will be chances of fellowship in October. Should nothing

of a connubial kind happen in the interim——”

“Be quiet, Alec, and let go my hand, the Park-keeper is looking at us.”

“It might be as well to have had a fellowship, if one only held it a week. My classics were a bit rusty, so I have been looking them up.”

“Good boy.”

“Wait a bit; there is better to come. In the interim I must live, and it would be well to accumulate a small store in addition to my own very slender resources, and still in anticipation of those hymeneal contingencies before-mentioned.”

“Well.”

“Well; so I turned my classics to account; wrote a learned treatise on the digamma which I got inserted in the dreariest of scholastic magazines, at a very fair rate of remuneration, and also translated a few antique gems which have also found their way into periodicals of a livelier turn of mind—still, for a consideration.”

“ Well done !”

“ But I have *not* done yet. The theatrical visits to which you alluded as acrimoniously as a good Evangelical could have done, were all in the way of business. I am dramatic critic on a London daily paper—a probationer at present; nay, let us say it out, simply a penny-a-liner, but the pennies have really mounted up very satisfactorily, and I do not despair of a regular engagement on a fair income if I still prefer to hold my present roving commission.”

And this was the dear active fellow I had half reproached with loafing away his time in London, when it was only I who made him idle—I who had loafed away my time at T. and P., browsing on cold mutton or yawning under Evangelical stars. I did all I could, confessed my error, and asked his pardon.

“ Well,” he went on, drawing a bundle of letters from his pocket. “ I cannot say that you have been altogether idle either. Ecce signum !”

“ You mysterious creature, what do you mean ? ”

“ These are all answers to the advertisement you inserted in the *Times* a few days ago. ”

“ I inserted no advertisement in the *Times*. ”

“ No ; but I once again in anticipation of the matrimonial event, did it on your account. ”

“ To what effect pray ? ”

“ Can you possibly ask ? When the wishes of your affectionate relatives in Gower Street were so very clearly expressed, could I fly in the face of them ? They suggested you should be a daily governess, and a daily governess you are to be. This is the copy of the advertisement in the *Times*. You will not complain that it understates your acquirements. There is, I think, scarcely a branch of human knowledge or an item of female accomplishment with which you will not find yourself credited. You would not have done it half

so well yourself. The proverbial modesty of genius would have certainly stood in your way."

I looked it down, and found he had indeed described me as a feminine Admirable Crichton.

"And your announcement actually produced all those replies! I thought the governess market was overstocked."

"With the ordinary run of incapables, yes; but not with such articles as this."

"Of course you have made your selection?"

"Oh yes; and seen the lady. All that remains now is for her to see you and satisfy herself that you haven't a wooden leg or anything of that sort."

"Well, this is energy indeed."

"Quite a new line for me, I assure you; but I have learnt the truth of the French proverb, *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte*; and moreover I have found this, that in a big place like London, it's a man's own fault if he does not get on; either he is

lethargic and does not like work at all, or cocktailed, and won't take it because it does not quite square with his dainty preconceived ideas as to the eternal fitness of things."

"And the same remark, no doubt, applies to womankind."

"In these days of Higher Education, yes, to a very great degree indeed."

"And what have you got for me? I wonder whether I shall prove lazy or fastidious."

"Neither, I dare be sworn, darling. I have got for you," he went on, selecting a letter from his very voluminous collection, "an offer as exceptional as are the advantages you can bring."

"Not a definite offer."

"An offer as definite as mine was before Percy got his congé. It is all but settled. Mrs. Fane, the writer of this, is an Ultramontane Anglo-Catholic, whose son Fred I knew at Oxford. He was, of course, after all the maternal training, a violent Broad

Churchman, some few degrees beyond even your humble servant."

"Is it possible?"

"Really. On the strength of my friendship with the son, I renewed a previous slight acquaintance with the mother, told her the whole of your story—*our* story—and referred her to the Very Reverend the Dean of Zoar. He more than confirmed all that was said by me and my flaming advertisement. The result is that only a call is needed on your part to ratify the whole thing."

Although not given to the melting mood, I felt the tears rise to my eyes when I remembered how unjustly I had thought and spoken of Alec. I could only stammer out some insufferably foolish remark to the effect that he had made me feel quite a woman of business all at once. To this he replied with the supremest scorn.

"Immensely like a woman of business, indeed. I should like to hear what your Uncle Edward, or Percy the Beloved, would say on that score."

“What have I done, or left undone?”

“Never even asked what you are to do, or how much you are to get for it.”

“Tell me.”

“You are to convert one nice, merry, but meaningless little girl of sixteen, into as great a genius as yourself; and you are to receive——” he named a most exceptionally large sum——“which I may inform you is about the stipend of two full-blooded curates, who have been at the expense of a college education.”

“But, Alec, you are romancing.”

“Possibly. Mrs. Fane may be a woman of such discrimination as to loathe you directly she sets eyes upon your gaunt form—just as I did, you know. However, we are at the Park gates, and yonder is an opportune hansom. Let us go and turn my romancing, as you call it, into reality.”

We went; and, as far as I am concerned, I may add, in the words of Cæsar’s “thra-sonical brag,” “I saw, I conquered.” My employer—how strange it seems to write

that word for the first time—is a little, fashionable, almost *fast* widow; and her daughter, my pupil, a pretty loveable girl appropriately named Amy, for she is beyond doubt a spoiled child. The barest reference was made to terms, subjects, or hours, and that only to confirm the almost fabulous state of things reported by Alec. The whole business conversation was over in five minutes; and when we adjourned to luncheon, I felt as much at home with Amy and her mamma as though I had known them for years. We do get to know some people better in an hour than others in a lifetime. Mrs. Fane is an Anglo-Indian, and the national reserve is pretty well burnt out of us in the tropics.

“Will you excuse my asking, Mrs. Fane,” I said, “whether Mr. Lund has duly apprised you of what I suppose I ought to call *our* heretical opinions?”

“Miss Llewellyn finds everything so much *couleur de rose*, Mrs. Fane,” added Alec, “that she wants just a dash of

colder colour. She will make herself out the most awful heretic."

"You are a heretic past praying for, I know," replied Mrs. Fane; "but I am willing to accept even your estimate of Miss Llewellyn's faith—not that I have any right to inquire into it at all. You describe her as Broad; but she went to cathedral twice a day."

"So did I."

"Because you were obliged, you horrid man."

"But then she only went to look at me. See the awful consequences. I am a predestined Benedict. My fellowship will be a hollow mockery——"

"If you get it—very!"

I assured Mrs. Fane I meant to convert Alec out of hand now I had secured him; and she said—

"Let him be. Don't hurry the process. A bad 'vert is worse than the most determined heretic. I can bear a good destructive Broad Churchman. It is only your

dogmatic Evan' that my soul cannot abide."

"My firm opinion is," answered Alec, in a stage whisper, "that Mrs. Fane is one of those wolves in sheep's clothing, a Jesuit in disguise, and that she is thus civil to us—to you especially—only to burn you as a heretic."

"Or else convert you," she suggested.

"I beg pardon, *per*-vert me, if you please," rejoined Alec.

"As Uncle Sam would say," I added.

"Well, 'vert you. Let us drop the prefix."

"And you, Elsie," continued Alec, "go back to the sequestered realms of Gower Street, and drop, in your turn, a bombshell into the family circle by stating that it is your intention at once to accept office under Mrs. Fane. See how long it will be before the Man of Sin is brought to the front."

I had a brief conversation with Amy; found out what she had been doing—which required very few words indeed to convey—

and then we parted, it being arranged that I should commence my attendance on the following Monday morning.

“To complete this transformation scene, Alec, and constitute you my good genius altogether on the spot, it is only necessary that you should introduce me to my future residence. I presume I shall go into lodgings when I begin with Miss Fane; or do you contemplate my remaining at Gower Street?”

“On no account. Hey, presto, quick! Behold the good genius cap-à-pie. Turn down this next street. Here, at this door. Are Miss Llewellyn’s apartments ready?” he inquired, as the maid-servant answered our summons.

“All ready, sir;” and upstairs we went.

It is the sweetest bijou apartment in the French, not the English sense of the term; three little rooms au troisième and a doll’s house kitchen en suite. My sitting-room is furnished plainly, but with all necessities; my bedroom quite in the conventual style. All

bears the impress of my dear Alec's care and thought. I could not help noticing at the first glance that there was a little standard oak cross on the chimney-piece of the sitting-room, and a crucifix at the bed-head: nor could I refrain from putting my arms round his great brawny shoulders and giving him a kiss before the grinning maid-servant, as I said—

“ You dear, thoughtful fellow ! And you put these for me ? ”

“ No ; do not let me shine in borrowed plumes. The ecclesiastical apparatus is an after-thought of Mrs. Fane's. The apartment was mine—is yours. That is, I vacate it in your favour *pro tem*. This morning I project a visit to Doctors' Commons. Do you know what that means, Mary ? ” Alec asked of the still wonder-stricken domestic.

“ Please, sir, I fancy it means putting up the banns,” she simpered.

“ Quite right, Mary ; it often does.”

“ Alec ! ” I feel bound to protest.

“ Well, make yourself easy, Elsie, for the present. It is not to take out the licence I am going to Doctors’ Commons to-day ; but to look into the provisions of two wills in which you are interested. If, however, you would like me to combine pleasure with business, I will at the same time procure that interesting document. You have room for a married couple here, haven’t you, Mary ?”

“ Oh, plenty, sir ; and we shall be so sorry to lose you.”

Alec went off to Doctors’ Commons, and I returned to Gower Street for the last time, as it was deemed better I should transfer my household goods at once, and get ready for the ensuing Monday, when I was to begin my new life.

When I announced to Uncle Sam over the cold mutton that I had procured a situation as governess, I saw him exchange a significant look with Aunt Patty. Apollonius of Tyana was said to possess the power of interpreting the language of birds.

How he got at the grammar and vocabulary I never could imagine ; but I have a great idea that I also have acquired the faculty of reading the inarticulate thoughts of my neighbours, as well as of conveying my own without the intervention of words. According to my interpretation, Uncle Sam meant to say to Patty—

“Good. We shall be relieved of a responsibility ; but the girl is going ahead rather too fast for us.”

What he said aloud was—“Indeed, that is very creditable to you ; but how did you hear of it ?”

“From an advertisement. It is in the family of Mrs. Fane.”

“Mrs. Fane, of Green Street, Grosvenor Square ! You cannot mean it, Elsie. She is a Ritualist.”

“Is she indeed, Aunt Patty ?” I replied, assuming a childish solemnity. “How very dreadful ! But she is an exceedingly nice woman, and pays me a ridiculously high salary.”

“Wages to ensnare your soul, Elsie. She is the most worldly woman in Mayfair ; and at the same time the most active propagandist, nominally for Anglicanism, really for Rome.”

“Anyhow, I am going to her to-morrow morning. You know Rome is not the same bugbear to me, Aunt Patty, that it is to you and Uncle Sam. It appears to me to be conceding a great deal too much when we say we cannot come near a Roman Catholic, or be present at their worship, without ‘going over’ there and then.”

“Can you touch pitch and not be defiled ?” Sam asked.

“Undoubtedly yes ; if you know how to go to work. I could tar a mile of palings, and any number of five-barred gates, without getting a particle on my fingers or dress.”

“Your simile is very bucolic, and scarcely relevant,” sniggled Aunt Patty.

“Let us drop the subject, then, dear aunt, as one on which we are not likely to

agree. I will go to my room, and write home to tell them of my good fortune. It's a T. and P. night, I know, is it not?"

"Yes; dear Mr. Morphine, a convert from Rome—a convert, not a pervert, mark you, Elsie—is going to give an address on the abuses of the conventual system. That will come home to your case, I hope."

"I don't exactly see why; since I am going to be a governess, not a nun, and am no more likely to turn Roman Catholic than you, my very dear aunt."

I thought I might as well try my skill at a passing gush, especially as I wanted to lead up to an announcement of my departure on the morrow, viâ a thanksgiving for her hospitality and cold mutton.

We went upstairs, and made an elaborate toilette for T. and P., my Aunt Patty by no means omitting to sacrifice to the Graces on such occasions. When I came down after having scribbled a brief

note home, to announce my brave day's work, and Alec's share in it, my uncle said—

“Shall I send your letter to the post with mine? I am writing to Zoar, too.”

So the two missives went together.

I am afraid I did not profit as I might by Mr. Morphine's address. I felt myself continually wandering off from the abuses of monasteries and convents to indulge in brown studies as to my own cosy little convent, and wondering how long it would be before I should close my spinsterly career. I was certainly a member of a contemplative order all through that evening; and when Mr. Morphine, having been set on me, as I could see, by Aunt Patty, came and asked me what I thought of his harangue, I shut him up by telling him plainly I had not heard one word of it.

How delicious is the sensation of earning money for the first time, and so feeling independent! I do not think I am mercenary; but I have been sitting up to-night

in my second-floor back tottling up little sums and seeing what our joint incomes will be—I mean mine and Alec’s—and how far that will go towards providing for the dear old folks living as they have been accustomed to do, supposing the worst comes to the worst; that my father is ruined—Aunt Phillis unrelenting, and the Topaz estate irretrievably gone. I have wandered off into little division sums and seen how much I shall be making a day, and what I can put by to form a nest egg, so that there may be something to begin upon when the exodus takes place. I have even found myself looking at these idiotic sheets, and wondering whether a publisher would give me anything for them if I expanded them into a novel. I wish something startling would take place, in reference to the Topaz Farm or the Welsh estates, so that I might get a spice of sensation into my story. Supposing Alec were to discover something at Doctors’ Commons to-day, in reference to the wills.

A will is always an interesting feature in a story.

I will retire to rest now, and hope for the best. Things have taken such a happy turn to-day, that anything may be on the cards.





CHAPTER VII.

THE TORN PAGE IN THE DIARY.

AMONG the cardinal virtues recognised at Gower Street, the most human were those enshrined in the proverb, "Early to bed and early to rise," &c. I mean the others, such as Predestinarianism, and unflinching opposition to the Roman Catholic system, which were two of the most prominent at T. and P., seem, as far as I, in my unregenerate condition, can see, to have little bearing on social existence. This double maxim too, of early retirement and rising, was not recommended on the usual grounds—namely, that it made a man healthy, and wealthy, and wise; it was looked upon in the light of a duty—disagreeable, and ergo to be adopted. Just when we were getting

sociable of an evening, if sociability could ever be predicated of us at all, and just as (I could not help thinking) the hot water was being brought in at home for my father's "night-cap," a prim maid-servant used to appear with a trayful of bibles and hymn-books, and, after protracted family devotions, we retired to our rooms. I still adhered to my old habit of writing; and during my stay with Uncle Sam was continually losing my credit for the cardinal virtues by oversleeping myself in the morning, and coming down when my aunt was in the thick of a chapter of *Chronicles*, or the "Reflections" in *Brown's Family Bible*. I have lost all chance of attaining the cardinal virtues now, for have I not formed a league with Mrs. Fane? and did not Alec come this morning, in the most brazen-faced way, and fetch me in a four-wheeler? My aunt said nothing, it is true, but she looked as though she felt it acutely, and wiped away the accustomed tear from her sympathetic eye when I introduced her to Alec. If she had

given me an opportunity, I would have enlightened her as to the relations in which we stand. It would have relieved her mind, I think, but she was too horrified to allow much conversation, and is, I feel sure, glad to have washed her hands of me.

Uncle Sam was not there. We got up as usual, it seemed to me in the dead of night, and for once I was down in time for prayers: but Uncle Sam was off before me, and Patty prayed for him on his journey in a little paragraph which was made to fit into Thornton's Family Prayers in case of emergency. Those moveable paragraphs are terrible stumblingblocks, and I disgraced myself dreadfully one evening when Patty had a cold and asked me to read prayers for her. Uncle Sam never would read—I cannot tell why—and I fancied, rightly or wrongly, was always glad when family devotions, and especially T. and P., were over. Uncle and aunt have no offspring; but in the Family Prayers there is a passage where a blessing is asked on the

“children and servants of this family.” I did not notice the italics, and serenely read the petition through; nor do I think I should have observed my faux pas (for I was thinking hard of something else), had I not heard the servants sniggling. The cook exploded unmistakeably, and was frowned out of the room by Aunt Patty, who I felt sure would read herself into a bronchitis before she ever asked me to officiate for her again.

“Where is Uncle Sam journeying, auntie?” I asked, assuming the accustomed childish manner which I always adopted when I wanted to ferret anything out.

“To the north of Ireland, dear, on an evangelizing mission,” she replied; and do you know, it is a dreadful thing to say, but I felt certain Patty was not telling the truth. This is one of the most questionable gifts I possess, that of knowing, apart from the ordinary outward and visible signs, when people are fibbing. I really do not like it. My maxim always was, “Let people

say what they like of me behind my back as long as they are civil to my face," but it is no use for them to be civil to my face, since I can thus see through them. I never could echo the prayer that we might see ourselves as others see us; and really I find the reverse of it—namely, the seeing people as they are, almost as uncomfortable and ineligible. It takes the glamour away from life, and renders Fools' Paradises impossible. Perhaps I could have liked Cousin Percy had I not seen quite so far into him. Even Mr. Moddle might have had a chance had I been a trifle more obtuse.

"Why does he start evangelizing in the middle of the night? And why did he not tell me he was going?"

"The post——"

Aunt Patty was just going to commit herself; but I really was anxious not to make her tell more fibs than were necessary.

"The post does not come in during the small hours, does it? And I was up until after midnight, writing."

Aunt Patty reddened a little and said—

“Your uncle, dear Elsie, does not sound a trumpet before him.”

“As the hypocrites do?”

“And he very often receives sudden impressions to do things.”

“Does he indeed, and in the middle of the night, too? It must be very inconvenient.”

My aunt said something about the wind blowing where it listed.

“But that’s like the spirit-rappers. They talk of impressions, and say they come oftenest in the middle of the night. Do you know, they get so angry with me when I tell them it’s indigestion.”

I have passed, thank goodness, out of the atmosphere of this particularly small talk now—passed, never more to return I hope, out of the orbit of T. and P. And yet I cannot help pausing to ask why T. and P. people think it necessary to make life so utterly uninteresting, and themselves so exceedingly objectionable, and cannot for

the life of me see why what are called spiritual views of life should jaundice their professors against all that makes existence loveable — nay, liveable. Among those phases of faith through which I have so far passed, none is to me more curious than this. They are—I mean those of my immediate acquaintance, who belong to the Evangelical school—thoroughly good people, I daresay; I am sure I try to believe and think so. But they do possess the singular knack of making their religion uncomfortable to themselves and everybody else. Why this should be so, I repeat I cannot imagine.

I am glad to think that this diary-keeping is almost over. I hear a voice within me saying, much as somebody observed to Macbeth, “Write no more.” It seems fearfully egotistical to be always chronicling small beer about one’s self. Besides, now that Alec’s existence is so blended with my own, I feel as though it were only one segment of our united selves writing, and

that a single moiety has no right to assume responsibility for the entire duality. These are uncommonly long words, I know ; but indulge me, kind reader (always supposing I am ever going to have readers), in a single outburst of egotism, and I have done.

Everything is, indeed, as Alec said, *couleur de rose*. I get the best accounts from Zoar. My father is being "pulled through" by Uncle Edward. I have no notion in what that process consists ; but it sounds to me rather like a violent one. I knew Aunt Patty was telling me a story ; Uncle Sam has gone down to Zoar, and never went to the north of Ireland at all. Alec says he wants to be "in at the death," but I have no notion what he means. Even Percy and Mr. Moddle, my father tells me, are all kindness. How much better people are than we give them credit for ! I really fancied my two rejected suitors would wreak their vengeance on the devoted heads of my parents, in fact they almost threatened to do so ; and here I am told that they are

“all kindness.” I cannot be surprised at their being piqued just at the moment. It must be so annoying for a big, full-grown man to be refused by a gaunt girl like me. But then I have a theory that no man should ever lay himself open to such an indignity. He ought to be able to see beforehand how the land lies. If the custom of Leap Year should ever become permanent, and strong-minded ladies take to wooing, I am quite sure I should never incur the danger of a refusal from the swain to whom I laid siege. I should read him through and through like a book beforehand; but then I have, as I said, this fatal gift of knowledge, and am “clever.” Perhaps that is what the Zoar folks meant by this epithet. Dear old Zoar! what ages ago it seems since I was there. It appears as far off as Timbuctoo or California.

My work is child's play. I try to gild the pill with Amy by adopting old Ascham's direction “teach the childe cheerfullie and plainlie.” What a real man

before his time dear Roger was! Mr. Moddle taught me Latin composition entirely on Ascham's plan of retranslating the epistles of Cicero, and not omitting the *suaviter in modo element*. "Where the childe doth well, either in choosing or true placing of Tullie's words, let the master praise him, and say 'Here ye do well,'" says honest Roger, "for I assure you there is no such whetstone to sharpen a good witte, and encourage a will to learning as is praise."

I dine with the Fanes about five days out of the seven, and the exception is for Alec to be absent. Then of course he sees me home, and I give him his *congé* ruthlessly at the street door. I am gradually losing all my landmarks in this diary, and am not in the least responsible for past and present tenses. It would be just as easy to write or print "gave" as "give" there, but I fancy I rather like the idea of bewildering my possible readers and critics; or is it the truth that I am a little bewildered myself? Perhaps so.

One night when we had come as usual to the portal, and I rigidly delayed putting my latch-key into the keyhole until Alec had said good-night—for he always looked threateningly as to coming in—he said—

“I don’t feel in the least bed-like, nor do I think you are inclined for Morpheus, I will come in and chat.”

“That you will not,” I replied.

“And what for no? Are you going to play Miss Propriety?”

“Perhaps. You do not enter.”

“Then let us take a walk about the quiet streets, and talk a bit.”

“I am not quite sure that such a proceeding would enter into the rôle of Miss Propriety; but I will do that;” and we did take a walk, first about the quiet streets, and next into the quieter Park, where we sat down on one of the benches with guardsmen making demonstrative love to erratic cooks and housemaids on all sides of us.

I began to take Alec to task as to his

discoveries at Doctors' Commons, about which he thinks proper to preserve the most ridiculously mysterious silence; but, carried away, perhaps, by the atmosphere of billing and cooing around him he begun, after a little preliminary billing and cooing on his own part upon which I do not feel bound to expatiate—

“Tell me, Elsie, why you were so rigid on the subject of my not crossing the threshold to-night. Was it really Miss Propriety?”

“Let us put it to the score of the lodginghouse people, and say they wouldn't like it.”

“Which is not the case; they know me—know us—too well.”

“They may, but the neighbours don't. Put it down to that.”

“But why not speak out? Are you not above what simpering girls call les convenances?”

“Can any girl, simpering or otherwise, afford to be?”

"Oh! if you put it as a matter of *l. s. d.*"

"I did not mean that exactly; but put it so. What would Mrs. Fane think?"

"What would Mrs. Grundy think?—the universal standard. But I want to put Grundy aside for the moment, and discuss the matter on broad principles."

"Do you mean Broad with a big B?"

"Yes; I mean this. Does not breadth of doctrine involve almost of necessity corresponding breadth of practice?"

"As Mrs. Fane's sacramental theory logically leads to her genuflexions at the Consecration and Incarnatus?"

"Yes; or Sam's Calvinism to T. and P. Does not anything like breadth of creed lift us out of the atmosphere of Grundy?"

"Into the most transcendental Anti-nomianism?"

"Well, if you like good long Mesopotamia-like words, yes. Are we not a law unto ourselves?"

“It were a perilous thing to say or think so !”

“As an exoteric creed for the uninitiated vulgar, yes ; but for us who have passed the portal of the sanctuary——”

“That was just what I did not allow you to do, you see.”

“But ask yourself, my darling, whether it be not utterly unreal for you to adopt this tone of exclusion towards me ; and that is the one thing to dread, Elsie, lest the faintest suspicion of untruthfulness or unreality should ever come between us twain ; we should be ‘twain’ then instead of one as we are now, are we not ?”

I answered him to his satisfaction, and he went on—

“Let us, as a matter of principle, set these gossips—if there be gossips out of Zoar—at defiance. Supposing they did grumble ; supposing even my most elastic of friends, Mrs. Fane, got scandalized, could we not solve the difficulty at a stroke ?”

“How ?”

“Hymen would be our *deus ex machinâ*. It is but one more visit to Doctors' Commons, twenty minutes interview with a mild curate, and the glaring impropriety would be metamorphosed into a bounden duty. Do you believe in this power of the clergy, the power of an empty ceremony to transform wrong into right?”

“I did not say I did, but——”

“I know what is coming. *People* do. Those ‘people’ are our sole standard of morality. The conventionalities are our creed, and our practice is to set our principles at defiance whenever we have the chance of doing so without being found out.”

“Indeed! I should write a satire if I were you.”

“What more bitter satire can there be than you and I sitting out here in the cold to talk our heresies, when there is a decent room yawning to receive us?”

“It’s very romantic.”

“In the Zoar Woods it would be, and

delicious too ; but not here, where the very moonlight seems adulterated."

"My Alec is severe."

"It angers me to see anything small in you, Elsie."

"Angers you with me?"

"No ; but with society which tries so successfully to dwarf you down to its own low standard."

Next day, to my shame and confusion of face, Alec broached this matter at dinner, and chaffed me in the most dreadful way at my assumption of Miss Propriety, particularly after my Zoar escapades. To my astonishment he found a warm ally in Mrs. Fane. As for poor Amy, she sat with her great meaningless eyes wide open, wondering what it was all about.

"Really, Elsie," Mrs. Fane said, for she had got to call me by my Christian name, "I have found that the devotion to Grundy is thrown away. If one could always ride the high horse, it might be as well perhaps ; but I have found that impossible, and the

creed of Grundy is as sanguinary as that of Draco. One faux pas and you are immolated. Dovecot Hill was fatal to you."

"But people here know nothing about that."

"Oh, on the grounds of what 'people say' you are right. I was discussing the matter rather with a reference to one's own innate sense of propriety."

"Checked with the compensating influence of Grundy," suggested Alec.

"Yes. In your own consciousness, and if Grundy knew, Elsie, you were undone on Dovecot Hill. Do you cave in?"

"I suppose I must."

That night Alec came in, smoked his cigar all up the stairs, routed up the landlady to say a cheery word or two, and even asked the maid-servant whom we met going to bed, whether she was not shocked at the bad hours Miss Llewellyn kept; and eventually sat deep into the small hours, defending his position against a long series of assaults on my part made with the object

of ascertaining what he had discovered at Doctors' Commons.

From the transparently triumphant manner he assumes, I am sure he holds a trump card in the will which he means to play off suddenly and astonish me as he did in the matter of Mrs. Fane and my lodgings. I have discovered that he is in correspondence with Briggs, the precentor of Zoar Cathedral, who was at the same college with him, though considerably his junior, and with whom he had a slight acquaintance only at Zoar. He calls him his special correspondent at the seat of war now.

On Sundays Alec and myself accompany Mrs. Fane and Amy to an advanced Ritualistic church in the suburbs; and it is a problem for me to study the effect of the sensuous worship on those two widely different, but apparently equally unpromising natures. Mrs. Fane is thoroughly a woman of the world; Alec the very type of the philosophical sceptic; and yet I have seen each of their eyes filled with tears at

some thrilling passage in an Anglican Mass, or a more than usually pathetic stanza in one of those hymns they sing so effectively at St. Cyprian's. It is, I fancy, the only church in London where they have adopted a modification of the beautiful Roman Benediction Service. I scarcely know, indeed, whether I ought to call it a modification; for with the single exception that they substitute a Litany of the Blessed Sacrament for that of our Lady of Loretto, the two services are identical. The "Host" is reserved, elevated, and benediction given to the sound of silvery bells and the fumes of incense, just as in the Church of Rome herself; and I constantly see Alec's head go bobbing down at the "*veneremur cernui*," and Mrs. Fane's nose level with the tessellated pavement, whilst I sit erect like a good Protestant, and coldly wonder whether it is not good for us to be there; whether anything is not better than that cold creed of the sceptic which would appertain to them both—perhaps does still appertain to

them both, and in a degree to myself too, but leavened in their cases, at all events, with an element of beauty and hopefulness in their susceptibility to the influences of that ornate ritual.

Little Amy, my own pretty pupil, is the type of the worshipper pure and simple. No doubt has ever shadowed that childish mind, nor is it ever likely to do so. She is one of those unquestioning little bodies (I wonder whether we mean by that expression to exclude the idea of soul) who give its devotees to every faith; and whose lot is so purely enviable because they never appear to have any trouble in making up their minds on any subject. They take them ready made. It is a matter of feeling with them from beginning to end. They live, love, marry, perhaps die, without any very keen interest in the matter, so far resembling those lower orders of creation Alec on a certain memorable occasion made believe to envy.

“I sometimes feel, Elsie,” he said to me

in explanation one Sunday night, when I had roasted him not a little about his genuflexions at St. Cyprian's, "as though I should like to swamp Reason in these matters of religion altogether, and develope Faith only. Newman and Manning must have done that."

"But I thought you defined Faith as reasonable belief based on evidence, and declined to draw any line of distinction between Faith popularly, and Faith theologically so termed."

"That has been my theory, but will it hold water?"

"I hardly know."

"And I am beginning to doubt it. I talked the other night, in my capacity of descriptive writer on a penny paper, to a poor girl who had thrown herself over London Bridge, and been rescued from drowning. I should immensely like to talk to one of those—not the Cardinal or the great Doctor of the Oratorians—but one of the smaller men of my own calibre who had

made the plunge from Anglicanism to Rome."

"Well, there is no dearth of 'verts. But why does not your ornate Anglicanism suffice you?"

"Because I cannot reconcile it with Establishmentarian principles. At every genuflection I have to ask myself whether I am not flying in the face of the Arches Court and the Judicial Committee of Privy Council. In Rome it is all recognised and a matter of course. Never be surprised, Elsie, if you find Mrs. Fane and myself become a brace of interesting 'verts."

"Even with your avowed rationalistic principles."

"Even so."

"You are an enigma, Alec."

"But you have solved me, darling Elsie, have you not?"

"I think so. I believe you to be thoroughly religious—naturally religious, I would say—but scared off almost into

irreligion by anything conventional in creed or practice."

"As far as I can appraise myself after really an honest stock-taking, I believe I am a neologian in my esoteric, but a Catholic in my exoteric creed."

"What a combination!"

* * * *

I warned you, courteous reader, did I not? at the outset, that I was not going to confess—at least, that I did not pledge myself to a full confession. I also suggested a brief while since that I might not improbably be led to bring this diary to a close. I am going to end it finally with this chapter, and even before doing so, I tear up several pages, and in their place put those mysterious asterisks. To be altogether dramatic, let me go on and say you must imagine a period of about two months to elapse between these two entries. I cannot help what inferences may be drawn from the hiatus. It would be quite impossible for me to let those written pages remain in

existence. I am cremating them as I pen the present lines. They are slowly consuming on the hearth, and Alec is stirring their charred remains irreverently about with my poker to see that none of the sheets remain unconsumed.

“By all means let them perish off the face of the earth,” says Alec, who is comfortably arrayed in dressing-gown and slippers. “If you really want to finish off that volume with the interesting and suggestive gap in it, I will go to my study until you have done; only let me remind you that ’tis now the very witching time of night, and we both of us have to be up early in the morning.”

Alec’s study was the third room in my little suite, and he has taken up his abode there permanently now. He thrives wonderfully at his journalism, and makes me write occasionally in magazines. He suggested that two housekeepings united would be much more economical than separate establishments, so here we are. Mrs. Fane

again helped us to furnish, and tells me that the plan of keeping Alec under my eye, and seeing that he reads as well as writes, is the only possible means of securing him a chance for the fellowship. His examination is now perilously near; and I have made him promise that, when he returns from Oxford after his ordeal, he will take Zoar en route; for I hear little about my father's affairs, and am getting anxious. He writes too hilariously, and I hear so much of Uncle Sam being backwards and forwards and in collusion with Uncle Edward, Percy, and Mr. Moddle, that I suspect mischief is brewing. The connexion with Gower Street is quite broken. Aunt Patty blushes, I am told, at the mention of my name, begs it may not be alluded to, and says it is nothing more than what she expected. Dishonest doctrines always eventuate in discreditable practices, she says; which is only, after all, a plain-spoken way of stating Alec's own theory on the subject—is it?

The expected time has at length arrived;

for I did *not* finish off the diary that night. Alec suggested cooking something warm for supper in our doll's-house kitchen, and it struck me a more appropriate "situation" might occur for the fall of the curtain. The time has come for the fellowship examination, and Alec is off to his fiery trial. His last words were to bid me beware lest, in event of his being successful, the attraction of college life should be too great for him, and he should never appear au troisième again. I am not afraid of that.

Whilst he is away I am staying with Mrs. Fane. I cannot quite account for the fascination that little woman exercises over me, and still less do I comprehend why she takes to me as she does. We are as unlike as two women can be; and though it may be true that "in contrasts lieth love's delight" as far as people of opposite sexes are concerned, I cannot understand that being the case with two women or two men. One would fancy there must be some similarity to form a basis for the friendship.

So it is, however, we are fast friends; and Mrs. Fane makes no secret of her wish to "'vert" Alec, as she still terms it.

"But I am nearly as bad as Alec. Don't you care about 'verting me; or are you such a Mahometan as to hold that we have no souls at all, either to be 'verted or—the other thing?"

"No, I am not elevating the Koran above the Bible; but I am so certain that big fellow would be happier if he could believe. You *do* believe. I have gone through your phase of experience, and know well that any possible scepticism of yours is but the faintest reflection of Alec's graver, because more ingrained doubt."

"Then it is my mind rather than my soul, that you call in question."

"It sounds like it, does it not? I wonder how that great lad—I often think of him as no more—has got on at examinations to-day. It seems like making war for an idea to go and subject one's self to badgering from a lot of stupid dons when

he will never touch a farthing of emolument from his fellowship."

"Alec thinks it will sound well to say 'late Fellow of —— College, Oxenford.'"

"As I said, he makes war for an idea."

"No ; I think he fancies it will pay in journalism."

"But he isn't going to journalise all his life, is he?"

"What else is open to him?"

"Surely the Church."

I laughed and said I did not think Alec would ever so far revert to his former plans as to take Orders ; and, do you know, there came something very like an audible chuckle from Mrs. Fane when I said that ; so much so that Amy, who was sitting by, observed it, and, with a feeble attempt at incipient slang, asked her mamma what was the "little joke."

"I was trying to imagine Mr. Lund in canonicals calling me a 'Dearly beloved brother,' my dear."

For the life of me I could not see the

incongruity ; and even as she spoke, one of those strange flashes of thought came across me—I wonder whether it was a presentiment of anything looming in the future? I thought I saw Alec, with all the dark cloud of doubt removed, and reflecting on myself no longer scepticism but faith ; saw him the centre of life in a parish, brilliant in the pulpit, beloved in his closer ministrations among his flock. For the space of five minutes or thereabouts I felt quite romantic ; so much so that Amy came up to me, put her loving little arms round my neck, and said—

“ Elsie, dear, I believe you are cross with mamma for laughing.”

“ You know nothing at all about it, my dear Amy,” replied Mrs. Fane, “ and there is plenty of time for you to learn yet. One of these days you may look romantic, when your heart’s adored leaves you even for a week.”

“ And somebody sniggles at him in his absence, dear Amy,” I added, turning the

affair into a joke; but that picture hangs by me still, and I wonder whether it is one ever destined to be realized. Alec says there is no work that pays so well, or at all events, pays so readily, as scribbling; and projects a life of quill-driving for us both.

If I were not afraid of diminishing the effect of the asterisks above, I could insert a few more here; in fact they might be peppered pretty evenly over the whole of these concluding pages of my diary. I have only to perform that most irksome of all duties, waiting patiently for news. Alec sends me his papers every day, and I amuse myself with trying how much of them I could "floor" myself, resolving to compare notes with him on his return, and see how far our notions on the subjects of the Peloponnesian War, or the Eleusinian Mysteries coincide, and whether our solutions of the mathematical problems are identical. For him they are ridiculously easy, and I cannot fancy it possible that he will do otherwise than amble gently over

the course, and wonder whether he will announce the result in a telegram or a letter. He cannot do it personally, as he is to return viâ Zoar.

I am glad to say this diary is to end dramatically, after all. There are events to chronicle, one a very unexpected occurrence indeed ; of course I ought not to say I am glad of this one, but I should be hypocritical if I pretended to be very sorry.

Amy and I suspended our studies this morning to watch for the country post, and my little pupil ran down to get the letter for me. She came up very slowly, and looked scared as she handed me one with the Zoar postmark, addressed in my father's handwriting, and with a deep black edge. My heart beat as I broke the seal.

"I hope no bad news, Elsie?"

"None, darling," I said, as I recovered my breath. "At least, not *very* bad. My aunt is dead."

"Your aunt, Elsie?" said Mrs. Fane, as

she entered the schoolroom. "Poor old lady! she was of a great age, was she not?"

"It's not the old one," I replied; "she has an annuity, and therefore is sure to live on; it's Aunt Phillis."

"Aunt Phillis! And her money?"

"She has left it to me unconditionally."

"One more instance of people being better than their creeds. So she did not even except poor Alec from your list of possible husbands?"

"She appears to have annexed no conditions to her will at all."

"Then she must have re-made it, or added a codicil."

"Yes; the one I saw was certainly drawn by my Uncle Edward and Percy. This one, my father tells me, was made by Sheppard, a rival solicitor, shortly before her death."

"Requiescat in pace," said Mrs. Fane. "We shall have Elsie resigning her post now, Amy," she added. "Be very defe-

rential to her, if you please. She is an heiress."

"Not so large a one as to make her give you up, Amy, is she?"

"I am sure I hope not, Elsie—I shall still call you so, may I not?"

"What else should you call me?"

"Miss Llewellyn."

"Not if you expect me to answer to my name." And Mrs. Fane and myself had a mutual sniggle then.

The news from Alec was long delayed. The competition was close and keen. Two men were bracketed equal in examination, and seniority had to decide. Alec was academically older by some Terms, and was therefore awarded the fellowship.

"I had the satisfaction," he wrote, "of having attained my end, and at the same time of doing an agreeable act in reference to my competitor. When we were both summoned by the electors, and I was being congratulated, and my co-equal candidate encouraged to try again, I astounded them

all by asking then and there to resign in his favour. I craved their pardon for troubling them to examine me; but stated that it was my intention to marry at once, and not to touch the emoluments of my fellowship. I did not tell them that I was *married already*."

Simpleminded, and possibly alarmed reader, now you know the meaning of those suggestive asterisks. We had anticipated the event of the fellowship examination by adjourning to St. Cyprian's at the earliest canonical hour one autumnal morning, and then and there, in presence of Mrs. Fane, and a cassocked verger, giving and plighting our troth either to other as man and wife. We said nothing to anybody else about it. Alec was to convey the news to my father and mother by word of mouth when he visited Zoar, and nobody else had any business to inquire into the matter, except the lodging-house keeper from whom we rented our modest abode.

If one may augur the effect of this

announcement on the average reader of novels, from the way Amy opened her eyes when it was made to her, the dénouement must be a striking one indeed. It was something to hear I was an heiress; but to have to address me as Mrs. Lund was something quite beyond that small girl's comprehension.

Yes, Alec; this diary is quite done now. Our blended life, begun some time since, is one outwardly as well as inwardly now. All our little world knows it by this time, for he will have told my father, and——

No. It is to have a more dramatic finale still than I had imagined. A telegram is brought to me. From Alec, of course. No; to Alec, and coming from Mr. Briggs, at Zoar, so Alec has not got there yet. "Come at once; your presence absolutely necessary."

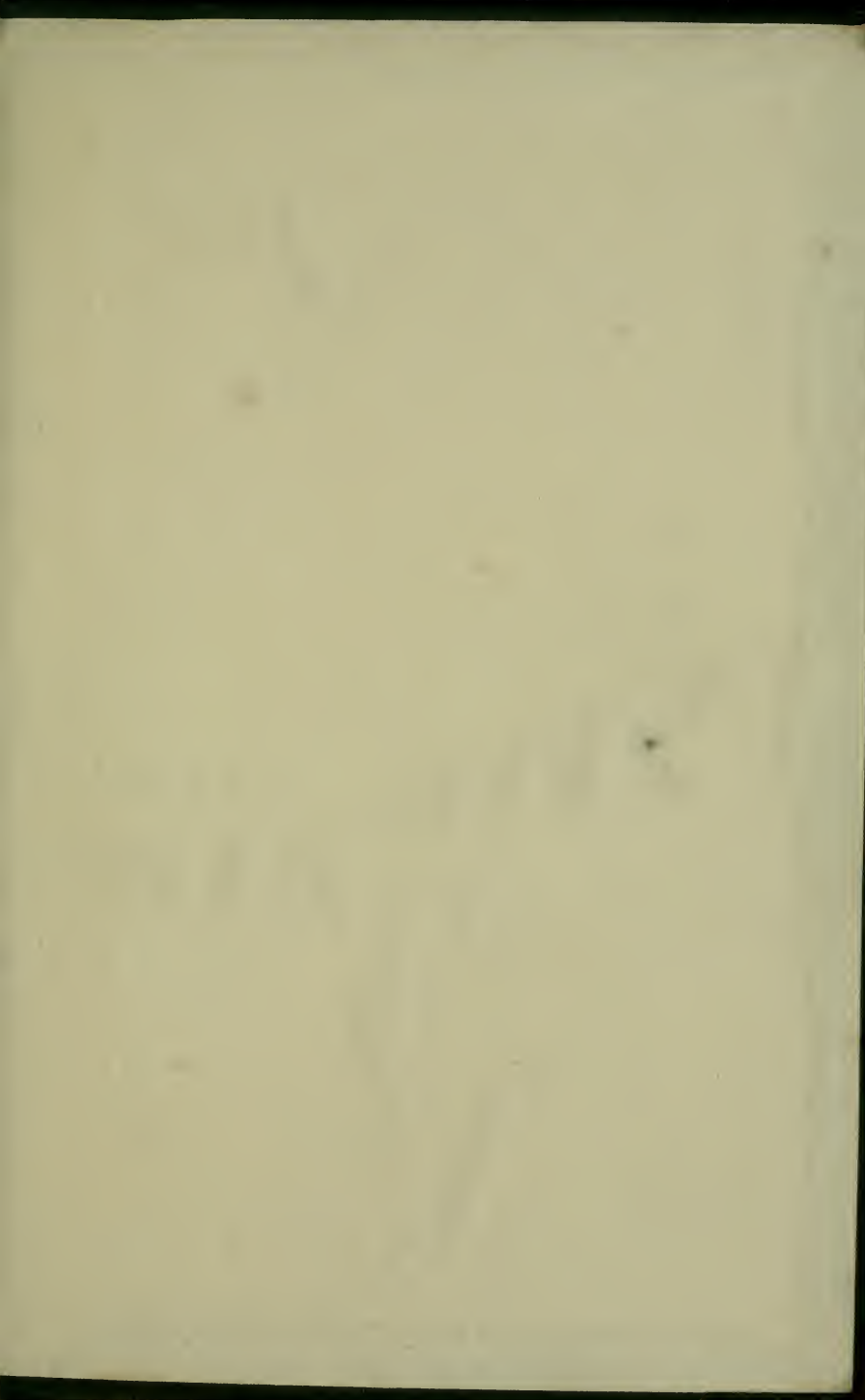
Well; he is there, no doubt, by this time. What can it be? I have a presentiment. Uncle Edward disputes the will.

Oh, these wills and money matters in general! Why cannot two people like ourselves, in the prime of life, and with a clear stage before them, carve out a future for themselves, and leave Doctors' Commons to the lawyers?

END OF VOL. I.

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